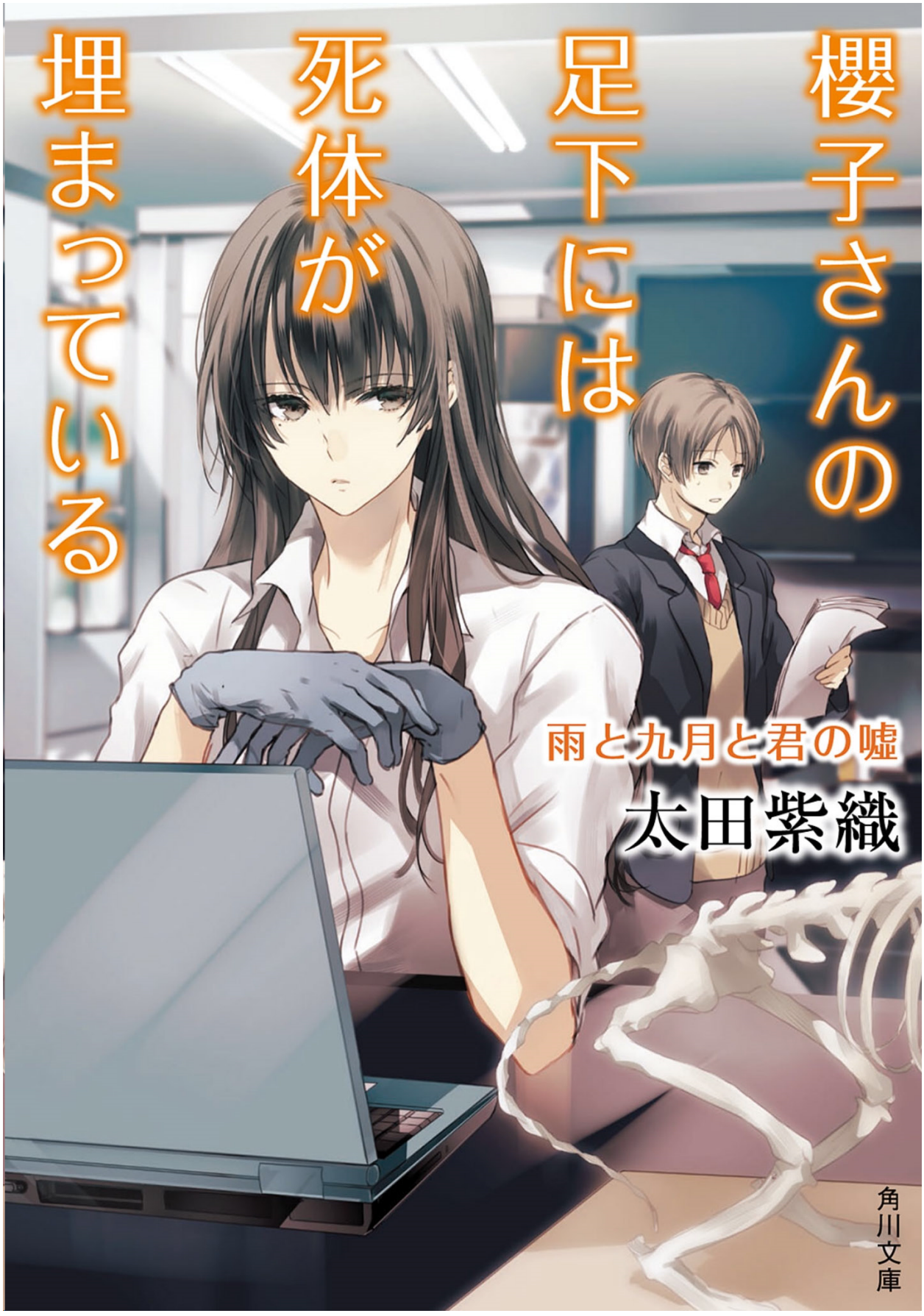
櫻子さんの
足下には
死体が
埋まっている
雨と九月と君の嘘
太田紫織
角川文庫

Table of contents

Prologue
First bone: The Cursed Man
Second bone: Grandmother's Pudding
Third bone: Entrusted Bone
Epilogue

Prologue

Hokkaido doesn't have a rainy season. Even if it's called the Ezo rainy season, and the weather isn't always clear at the start of summer, it's completely different from Honshu. That's why Asahikawa's rainy season is at the end of summer or the beginning of fall, until September. In Asahikawa, the rain suddenly starts falling like an overturned bucket. The summers are smolderingly hot, and the autumn still has a lasting summer-like feeling. It'll still be a short while until the Japanese Rowan trees on the streets turn orange. After waiting for autumn, Asahikawa's best season arrives.

To get out of this grey town for a while, I'm going to Sapporo. Even though it's about 2 hours away by car, Sapporo is already completely in autumn. It feels like the calendar has suddenly flipped to fall here. I came to Sapporo to go to my cousin's wedding.

Kyouko-nee-chan never played as a bride as a child. She's not quite as tomboyish as Sakurako-san, but a simple, white dress suits her. Kyouko-nee-chan looks happy, dazzling, and very beautiful. After meeting with Kyouko-nee-chan after such a long absence, she looks at me and says "you've grown so much."

I guess I am already a high school student. I'm very different from when I was in kindergarten and early elementary school.

"I see, you'll be taking your university exams in a year or two, right Shou-chan? If you come to Sapporo, I'll take care of you."

"Oh, that's a relief"

Kyouko-nee-chan smiles at my mother, who smiles back for a moment, without saying anything else.

"Sapporo… huh."

"Huh? Can you find a job in Asahikawa? A university? You're not the best at studying. You should go to university if you can. Oh, or you could be like Atsushi-kun and go to university somewhere else."

Kyouko-nee-chan is a bit insensitive, and she really knows how to get under my skin. Atsushi is my older brother.

"Nope." I groan.

"What are you planning to do?"

"No… Well… I haven't really thought about what I want to do yet."

"Don't you have any dreams for the future? Spit it out, already."

But it's true. This time it's not Kyouko-nee-chan, but my mother talking.

“Dreams for the future, huh…”

“What were your childhood dreams? What did you want to be?”

I make a troubled face, and mutter to myself, “childhood dreams? Did I have any?”

“You wanted to be an ally of justice. You said you wanted to be a hero, like your father.” My mother smiles as she interjects the conversation.

“Huh? Like him?” Kyouko-nee-chan says in a surprised voice.

“You know, he liked motorcycles. On his days off, he’d hop on his motorcycle and ride to Biei. One time, in order to keep you kids from going with him, he told you that he was going to fight an evil organization. You took it seriously.” My mother laughs loudly.

“I-I was just a kid!”

“Because of that, I bought you a transformation belt.”

“All the kids wanted one! It wasn’t just me!”

I feel my ears turn red, as I desperately try to refute my mother. Still, to tell the truth, my mother is right. When I was a child, wanted to be a hero, like my late father. I can faintly remember putting on a helmet, and thinking that I looked powerful. When I was little, about 3 years old, I completely believed what my father said. The father that rode motorcycles and fought bad guys will always be inside me.

“Well, a childhood dream usually doesn’t make for a good dream for the future. Ah, well, I wish you could’ve been born a little more handsome. Well, with modern specialty effects, I wouldn’t exactly say all heroes are handsome these days.” My mother says in a disappointed voice.

“But in Asahikawa, even someone handsome can’t become a super hero!” I reply, irritated.

If I left Asahikawa, my mother would be alone. My grandmother and grandfather won’t be around forever. My mother won’t say anything, but she has to shoulder everything alone.

“…Well, please tell me as soon when you make your decision. I want to know as soon as possible.” Kyouko-nee-chan ends the conversation.

Afterwards, my mother doesn’t bring up the topic again. I guess she doesn’t want me to leave Asahikawa, after all. I’m sure she doesn’t want to talk about that with me. As further proof, my mother is unusually quiet in the car on our way back to Asahikawa.

To get back to Asahikawa from Sapporo quickly, you have to pass through the Tokiwa tunnel. It’s a short tunnel on the curve just before you reach Asahikawa. After exiting that tunnel, you immediately enter Etanbetsu tunnel. In the tunnels, I like to count the orange lamps. Once I’m out of both the tunnels, it suddenly feels like I’m almost home. Seeing the city sprawled out in front of me somehow feels relaxing. I don’t know why. But I feel like even 10, or 50 years in the future, I’ll still feel the same way. I’m home, Asahikawa.

While I’m thinking to myself, my mother says, “we’re finally home,” with a sigh, then she suddenly laughs.

“That’s what I was just thinking.”

“Sapporo is nice, but Asahikawa is the best, after all.”

“…Yeah.”

I can’t think of what to say right away, since I’m not unhappy about living in Asahikawa. Still, I’d be lying to say I wouldn’t want to move to a bigger city.

“Well, If you were born in a huge city, you could do whatever you wanted without worrying about where you live.”

“Huh?”

“What? Shoutarou, you really haven’t decided what you want to do in the future?” My mother says in an amazed voice.

“…Well… Not really.”

“Get it together.” My mother lets out a huge sigh.

I think I should worry more about the things I can do more than the thing I want to do. My dreams for the future are still hazy and vague. Though it might be correct to say that I’m not prepared.

“Well, don’t worry too much, just make sure you’re happy. It’s common for children to leave the nest. Or rather, it’d be a problem if you didn’t. You have your life, and I have mine, so you can do whatever you like.” My mother says clearly, the hits the edge of the steering wheel. She’s pretending to be fine, but her voice trembles.

“…Well, just tell me when you decide.”

I avert my gaze from my mother, and look out the window. The streetlights flash by, and Asahikawa starts to enter my view. I feel like the days are getting shorter recently. I wonder where I’ll be in 10 years. Where will I be, and what will I be doing? Thoughts of Sakurako-san suddenly pass through my mind. I think she’ll be the same, even 10, or 20, years in the future, just like a specimen.

First Bone: The Cursed Man

Part 1

On the first Sunday of September, with cloudy autumn weather, I head to the city with Sakurako-san. I wonder if there’s a field burning somewhere. I open the window, but the dry air burns the back of my nose, but it still smells like fall. It feels nice, even if it doesn’t smell good. I close my eyes as the wind hits me.

“The forecast says it’ll rain tomorrow.” Utsumi-san says from the passenger seat.

“I hope it’s not much. Last time it rained a lot, the manhole cover in front of my house reached its capacity and overflowed. The water reached my front door, it was scary.”

“That time, there were several houses that flooded- oh! Kujo-san, please turn left just past the convenience store there.”

“Left?” Sakurako-san says quickly, then clicks her tongue.

Utsumi-san’s instructions are a bit late, so Sakurako-san’s driving is rougher than usual.

“Ah, please drive safely! I take pride in the fact that I’ve never been involved in a traffic incident.” Utsumi-san says “woah” as his upper body sways due to the sudden lane change, but he stays calm.

Ustumi-san is a police officer. He works at the police box in my neighbourhood. We helped a lost child, and looked for her house together, so we’re on good terms with each other.

That's why, even though it's his day off, he still can't be involved in an acquaintance's traffic violation. Still, if he had to give out a ticket for this, it'd definitely be his fault. Rather, he's paying for his mistakes, and Sakurako-san is the victim.

"No~, it was a strange thing to ask, I'm re~ally sorry."

Irritating Sakurako-san and I, Utsumi-san speaks in a strange, high-pitched voice, dissipating the stagnant atmosphere in the car.

"This isn't the first time you've caused me to suddenly drive wildly." Sakurako-san replies bluntly.

"Hahaha, that's true, sorry. You don't have anyone else to rely on, though. Hey, Kujo-san is beautiful and intelligent, she has pale skin, and she's a great detective. No, really, one time-" Even though it's obviously in poor taste, Utsumi-san smiles with his answer.

I don't think he's a bad person. He turns around, and starts talking happily, so I give him a bitter smile. I can't see from where I'm sitting, but I'm sure Sakurako-san is making a frustrated expression.

"Geez, we're not going out for fun. Utsumi-san, please take this a little more seriously."

I sigh. Today, Utsumi-san is hoping to go to a certain place. It's not a particularly enjoyable drive.

"Oh, that's right. Sorry, sorry." He apologizes carelessly. I don't know anyone who can apologize as cheaply as Utsumi-san. "But still… My friend suddenly called me and said something strange."

"Something strange?"

"Yeah. That he'll die soon."

"Die… Huh?"

'Death' is not something to be calm about.

"I'm sure he's just sick or something, and it isn't really that bad."

"Well… Maybe there's trouble?"

Even though he talks a lot, Ustumi-san is "technically" a police officer. He's a keeper of the law to protect citizens. Although he looks unreliable at a glance, I know he's actually brave, and has an unshakable sense of justice.

"Yeah… It seems like he, himself, also doesn't know what's happening."

"Doesn't know?"

"That's right. He says he's about to die. Maybe something happened that's hard to describe, so he wants to talk about it. But really, something is weird. What happened, and why?"

"What do you mean?"

"Yeah, could it be… something with the occult?"

"What?"

If it's not because of trouble or illness, why did he say he's going to die? All this creepy talk makes me want to go home soon. I'm not good with the occult or scary stuff.

Fortunately, today is partly cloudy. Even though there's lots of clouds, there's a bit of blue sky occasionally, and it's not supposed to rain. I want to enjoy the long weekend with my cross bike for a little while.

"Really, you don't just get to the point when you talk. Try to speak with your main point in mind." Sakurako-san notifies us that her irritation has reached its peak.

As soon as she stops at a red light, she violently strikes the steering wheel in an outburst of anger. Utsumi-san looks as me with a puzzled expression, but I just shrug my shoulders and don't help him. To be exact, I don't know what to say.

"Umm… It's a dog."

"Huh?"

"I said… a dog. A dog seems to be the reason."

"A dog!?" Sakurako-san and I say in unison.

"Right. A friend of mine was cursed by a dog. It seems everyone who owns the dog dies."

"… What?"

Is that a joke? My face forms into a stiff smile. When I see Utsumi-san's face in the rear view mirror, he looks very serious.

"My friend, Fujioka, seems to have taken a dog from his relative who passed away. The dog seems to be related."

"You're saying the dog curses its owner? You're sure it's not that there's big dog paw prints next to the owner's corpse?"

"Paw prints?"

"Never mind…"

Utsumi-san spoke in a confused voice. Apparently he doesn't read Conan Doyle.

"It's like… He gets passed around to different relatives, but every owner dies, one after another. It seems they were going to get rid of him because he's so creepy, but Fujioka decided to take him in…"

"Please do whatever you can," Utsumi-san adds.

The car goes over a small hill in a residential district.

"Get rid of him… Like at a veterinary clinic? That sounds terrible."

"Yeah. Well, he's a big, scary dog that looks like the watchdog of hell. He's trained well enough, so he's not dangerous. Well, I still can't say he's cute."

"The watchdog of hell… Like a Great Dane?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know dog breeds very well, but he's huge."

I don't know dog breeds very well, either. I'm not sure, but I think the hound of Baskerville from Granada Holmes was a breed like that. The name Great Dane makes them sound big, and seems strange. Even if it isn't a Great Dane, big dogs can be scary if they aren't trained properly. Still, I can't say they aren't cute when they're friendly. I love animals, especially dogs. Still, I'm a bit scared that there's such a terrible dog at the place I'm about to visit.

"I hear that recently, the dog has been watching him. Well, he should be happy to be close with his dog. But apparently it gives him a bad feeling. He notices it watching him, and following him around." Utsumi-san looks at the back seat, with a shaky voice. "The owner before Fujioka was his uncle, who also died after saying similar things."

"Haa…"

The owners dying one by one certainly isn't a calming thought. Still, aren't big dogs quieter and slower than cute and noisy small dogs? Of course, there are lively and friendly breeds of large dogs. There's an orchard near the Asahiyama zoo that I visit sometimes, and there's two labradors that live there named Honey and Karinka. They're cute, and always

hopping with excitement. Still, if the watchdog of hell was running around like Karinka does, I'd be scared.

"Isn't this kind of unexpected? Telling us that we're going to be meeting a scary dog, and saying someone is going to die is-" I say, but Utsumi-san groans.

"It seems that men in Fujioka's family have been short lived for generations."

"...Short lived?"

"His father died in his 30s. His uncle suddenly died before he turned 50 years old. It seems like… He's scared because it's his turn next. There's been so many that it's hard to ignore it, even if it's just superstition."

"I see…"

I was focused on the dog being the only reason, but I can understand his unrest with a bad omen like that.

"Idiotic." Sakurako-san silences our conversation with her dismissive tone.

"Sakurako-san."

"When a coincidence happens 2 or 3 times, humans label it something idiotic like destiny. However, it's possible for anything to happen, as long as the chance is above zero. Destiny is idiotic. Sheer stupidity."

"That may be so, but…"

But honestly, Fujioka-san's family members have still died. I don't usually believe supernatural stories like that. Still, I think there are some mysteries in this world that can't be explained by science.

"It's an unbelievable story, so of course it's easy to deny."

I try to argue with Sakurako-san, and look to Utsumi-san for help. He shakes his head at me through the mirror.

"No. I think so, too."

"Huh?"

"I really don't believe in the occult, but… I can't, and don't want to, believe it. After all, isn't dying from something like that is a little bit regrettable? And Fujioka's family, too?" Going as far as to say that, Utsumi-san's gets a deep wrinkle between his eyebrows, and his face twists. "Therefore, I want Kujo-san to investigate. Even if his relatives were short lives, there could be other reason. Maybe if he knows the reasons, he could avoid it. Maybe if he doesn't have all this needless anxiety, Fujioka could understand."

No, it's useless unless you know about it - Utsumi-san starts murmuring. The deep wrinkles between his eyebrows make him seem angry, and I see tears starting to well up in his eyes.

"In that case, Sakurako-san is certainly qualified, but…"

But she's not good at talking to people politely. For example, even if she herself can be kind, the things she says aren't. On the contrary, she will definitely end up hurting Fujioka-san...

"Above all else, I want you to set him straight. He's not cursed. He's overthinking it. After all, his child was just born, so the father can't say something like that, he just can't…" His voice is gradually getting hoarse.

I can't look Utsumi-san in the eyes anymore, so I look out the window instead. At the edge of my field of view, I see his fist trembling on his lap. I wonder if it's possible to help your

friend when they're suffering, without suffering yourself?

Utsumi-san is always a bit of an imprudent, funny person. Sometimes he gets mad, but he still smiles. His smile makes those around him smile with him. Ah, while the occult and a watchdog from hell are terrible, it can't be helped for today. I think about helping Utsumi-san and Fujioka-san while turning my gaze back to the scenery that's going by.

Part two

Even though someone's life is at stake, visiting the "demon dog of Baskerville's house" is a little scary. We reach the Fujioka residence before long, and my fear deepens. Sakurako-san's car slowly climbs the hill with many narrow streets until we eventually reach the top.

Fujioka's house is built in a spot with a nice view of Asahikawa. Asahikawa doesn't have a high class residential district, unlike Sapporo. There are only normal residential areas with luxury housing. Kaguraoka and Asahioka have a lot of greenery, so it's nice to live there, and there's lots of big houses. Fujioka's house is one of them. The plot it's built on is also huge, but it's quite different from the elegant mansions that Sakurako-san and Shouko-san live in.

Is this what people mean by modern design? The outside is completely black and square shaped, with big windows like on a café. It doesn't look like a place someone would live. It looks more like a research institution, or Dracula's black coffin. It towers over its surroundings, sucking up the sunlight and casting a huge shadow. I don't know how to describe it, but I feel like the word "curse" fits it well. I don't know anything about architectural design trends (or if that's even a thing) so I don't know if this is something extraordinary.

"It's a big house, and it was just built this year… It's very modern." Utsumi-san says while I get out of the car. "Fujioka used to live in a nice house in Kanto, but due to his father's work and his asthma, he moved here. Even after he went back, he couldn't forget about Hokkaido. He makes a living by dealing with stocks here."

"I see."

The vines growing like a green carpet over the black arch have a strangely intimidating atmosphere, but the little yellow flowers and red fruit are somehow a bit relieving. The yellow flowers are probably lysimachia. I remember seeing them just after they were planted across from the city hall.

"Yo! Fujioka, long time no see."

"I see you've arrived."

I was looking at the flowers, so I don't notice until I heard them talking.

"Wow, I heard you built a huge house, but I didn't think it'd be so big."

"Hahaha, well, something like that."

His modesty and his laugh, without a hint of arrogance, tells me that this is Fujioka-san, Utsumi-san's friend. He's wearing black slacks and a black shirt. He leads us to the house while playing with his bangs. He somehow seems very confident.

"Are you going to keep renting, Utsumi?"

"Ah, I haven't decided yet, since I don't even have a wife yet."

"That sounds like you." Fujioka-san snorts. His laugh sounds like he's looking down on

Utsumi-san a bit.

He's probably 180cm tall or more. Even Utusmi-san, who is taller than me, has to look up to make eye contact. Utsumi-san's curly hair looks like a bird's nest. Even though he said his khaki-coloured cargo pants a camouflage pattern, it looks more like a wrapping cloth pattern. He's also wearing a pink shirt. When he stands next to Fujioka-san, he looks shady in comparison.

"Day trading must be so profitable." Utsumi-san smiles at the house, with a carefree tone.

"I wish it was that great… Well, I just got lucky."

Fujioka-san clears his throat, then answers with a half-hearted expression. I guess luck is an ability, too. Then, a woman and a white, fluffy dog come out of the house.

"Don't stand and talk outside, the it's windy today. Invite the guests in, dear." The woman, who is a little younger than Fujioka-san, says with a smile.

She's probably Fujioka-san's wife. In contrast to Fujioka-san, she's wearing a soft, brown dress, with a white cardigan hanging from her shoulders. She seems quite calm. She's soft, and though I wouldn't say she's beautiful, she has a familiar feeling to her. The white fur ball runs up beside her.

"Woah!"

Utsumi-san, who is standing near the entrance, is knocked over by the fur ball, and yells. He almost falls over backwards. He's a medium to large size breed, but still a relatively large dog. His black eyes against his white fur are cute. He casually walks towards me, spins around a few times, and puts his paws on my legs.

"Oh, hello."

When I was a child, I learned that you shouldn't suddenly touch a dog's head, so I gently reach out my hard towards his chin. He lowers his head, closes his eyes, and "smiles." He runs around near Sakurako-san. He's cute.

"What a cute doggy-"

I start to speak to Fujioka-san's wife, but suddenly Sakurako-san screams from behind me. At the same time, Fujioka-san shouts, "Hector!" I turn around in confusion, only to see Sakurako-san laying on the shiny black pavement, with the white dog on top of her. He's licking her. For a moment, I think she's being attacked, but I smile when I realize that he's just being friendly. The dog likes Sakurako-san, but… she seems to find him irritating. Even though she's wearing skinny jeans and a white shirt, it's still hard to know where to look when she's flailing on the ground. The problem isn't that I can see her underwear, it's that her hips are exposed.

"Oh, geez…"

Utsumi-san is just watching, so I go to her rescue. Fujioka-san and his wife look at me, then run to the dog, too.

"Ugh…"

"I'm sorry, he's not usually like this…"

"He loves guests too much. I'm sorry."

Fujioka-san's wife pulls the dog away, while Sakurako-san looks at her sleeve.

"So there are things you like other than bones." I reach out a hand to help Sakurako-san up.

“Be quiet,” she says sharply.

As an apology, I give her my handkerchief, but she wipes her face with it without hesitation.

“Then, umm… Who are you?”

The wife seems to be wondering who we are. Utsumi-san and her husband look at us. She looks at Fujioka-san, and tilts her head to the side a bit.

“Oh, they’re my acquaintances, Kujo-san and Shoutarou-kun. They’re… something like detectives.” Utsumi-san explains quickly.

He seems to be holding a grudge after being knocked over, so he keeps a safe distance from the dog.

“Detectives?”

“Well, since you said it was curse, I wanted her to look into it.”

“Hmm…” Fujioka-san’s wife looks at Sakurako-san and I suspiciously.

“Oh, no, they won’t charge you money or anything like that. She solves mysteries as a hobby… Anyway, she’s good at it. Definitely.”

“Thank you, then…”

Fujioka-san looks troubled, and he doesn’t seem to be welcoming us, but he bows his head. I also nod. Sakurako-san ignores the conversation, and gives the handkerchief back without folding it. Fukuoka-san’s wife looks down at the dog, who is happily panting, and says, “thank you very much for coming.”

“He’s such a cute doggy.”

I fold my handkerchief and put it back in my pocket, then pet the dog’s neck. He has such soft, silky fur.

“His name is Hector.”

“Hector?”

“It’s the same name as Souseki’s pet dog.” Sakurako-san replies.

“Souseki as in Natsume Souseki, right?”

Natsume Souseki wrote “I am a Cat”. I’ve heard that he had a cat, but I’ve never heard of him having a dog.

“Are you familiar with him?” Fujioka-san confirms before answering Sakurako-san.

“It comes from Hector, the prince of Troy in “Iliad”. He was a hero who was attacked by Achilles, and is praised as one of the nine worthies. The diamond on his collar is a symbol of that. These days, the pictures on playing cards are modelled after the nine worthies, but the jack of diamonds is Hector’s equivalent.”

I stroke Hector’s neck, and look at his collar. There is indeed a silver, diamond shaped decoration on the black leather collar.

“My uncle, his first owner, was a bookworm. Even with so many books, Souseki was his favourite author.” I notice that Fujioka-san sounds excited.

Sakurako-san’s powers of observation and knowledge are fearsome, but hearing her being called a detective still doesn’t seem real. A little more cautious now, we’re invited into the house. Hector rushes past his owners, then stops in the entranceway and looks back with on front paw raised.

“Woah!”

Utsumi-san tries to stop Hector when he passes by, but he gets knocked over again.

“He’s so cute and fluffy.”

“The Samoyed dog breed comes from Siberia. They’re gentle and intelligent.”

“Really?”

Hector smiles again, like he knows we’re talking about him.

“It really does look like he’s smiling.”

“I’m sure he is smiling. He always makes that face when he’s in a good mood.” Fujioka-san says.

“Dogs and cats have similar ancestors, but unlike cats, who decided to coexist with humans on their own, dogs have a very deep history of domestication. It’s said that their history of evolving with humans caused dogs to evolve many mimetic muscles. Samoyeds are very close to primitive dogs. Since the wolf blood isn’t mixed, it’s said they have a high ability to communicate. In fact-“ Sakurako-san tries to continue talking, but as soon as she crouches down to take off her shoes, Hector licks her face.

“So… this is the cursed dog?”

“Yes, this is him.”

“…Huh?” I ask the married couple as I hand Sakurako-san a handkerchief again. Fujioka-san points to Hector.

“Umm…?”

I look at the Fujioka couple for confirmation, but they just nod quietly. I look at Utsumi-san, and he nods repeatedly.

“But, hell’s watchdog…”

When I look at Hector, he’s looking back at me with his black eyes and head tilted slightly to the side. He smiles with his mouth open. So this is hell’s watchdog. I can’t resist anymore, so I pet his head and neck again.

“Utsumi-san! What horrible dog?! He’s so cute!!”

“I’m scared! I hate huge animals like this!” Utsumi-san yells, and exaggeratedly trembles while holding the still open door.

I thought he was joking, but it looks like he’s actually scared. It seems like he’s been keeping his distance from Hector the whole time.

“Anyway, this is the curse?”

“Eek!”

Even though Hector is so lovely, Utsumi-san jumps up as soon as Hector looks at him. Well… Since he isn’t good with dogs, and Hector isn’t exactly a small dog, I guess it’s normal for him to be scared. For someone like me, who likes big dogs, Hector is quiet, cute and calm. I can’t imagine him bringing his owner unhappiness.

“Yes… I couldn’t believe it at first either, but his owners really have died one after another.”

“But he looks like a cute baby polar bear…”

It seems like I said what Fujioka-san was thinking. I heard they want to get rid of him, and even though it’s unfortunate, I wouldn’t be able to take care of him.

“Ah, but he isn’t usually a friendly dog. He never greets guests this happily.”

“Really?”

Fujioka-san continues walking into the sunny living room. The house has monotone décor, and everything has a modern design. Even the pictures on the walls are abstract, coloured only in black, white, and grey. Near the entrance to the living room is an Andy Warhol painting, but it looks more like a rorschach test poster to me. I mutter, “it looks like a giraffe skull,” under my breath, then Sakurako-san looks at me with a smile.

We’re asked to sit on the sofa. The sofa is comfortable to sit on, and it looks like it’s covered in custom black leather. However, it seems like the living room is the wife’s territory. A soft coloured cloth is hung over the sofa, and decorative plants line the shelves. I finally feel like I can relax here.

“Oh, a fireplace.” Utsumi-san suddenly says, with his legs on the sofa to escape from Hector.

I follow his line of sight, and see the small fireplace with a black, conical hood over it. Like the one at Sakurako-san’s house, it probably hasn’t been used in a while, and isn’t very well kept.

“Oh, I’ve always wanted a house with a fireplace.”

“A long time ago, my father stayed in a pension with a fireplace. I’m happy for you two.”

“Hahaha, you have a good memory.” Fujioka-san laughs shyly at Utsumi-san’s story.

“When I moved to Hokkaido, I thought I’d definitely get a house with a fireplace.”

“It’s pretty tough,” Fujioka-san’s wife says with a bitter smile.

“Really?”

“Because you have to chop your own firewood.” Fujioka-san’s wife says in a troubled tone while crossing her arms.

I guess you would need to chop wood to start it. You’d also need a lot of firewood to last Asahikawa’s long, harsh winters.

“But once the room warms up, it makes your whole body feel warm and calm.”

“Like far infrared therapy?”

Despite what she said, the wife seems to like the fireplace. It’d be nice to cook sweet potatoes and pumpkins in it.

“Because of the conditions this year, I have to chop firewood every day to keep my wife happy.”

Fujioka-san’s arms look thin, but he actually has well developed muscles.

“My husband failed to quit smoking. He always smokes in the yard, so it’s his chore to chop 5 pieces of firewood for every cigarette he smokes.”

“Otherwise it’ll become quite a problem.”

Fujioka-san laughs and encourages us to sit down again. As soon as we sit down, Hector puts his chin on Sakurako-san’s lap, and looks up at her like he wants to be pet. Sakurako-san looks at me like she wants help, so I pet him instead. I don’t think she’s scared of dogs, but she probably isn’t used to them. While I pet him, Sakurako-san buries her hand in his soft, white fur and calmly pets him.

“He likes you.”

“He really does. He won’t let me do that.” Fujioka-san says with a bitter smile.

“But recently he’s been warming up to you.”

“No… It’s less that he likes it, but more like he’s watching me. I’ve noticed that he’s

always behind me, staring at me."

That's certainly scary… Fujioka-san's wife brings coffee out of the kitchen, and asks us, "would you like sugar or milk?"

The coffee cup is unglazed light brown porcelain. I know that couples don't always have the same hobbies and preferences, but I wonder how they can get along so well when they're so different. I can't help but worry about other peoples' problems.

"Umm… Then milk, please."

Sakurako-san quickly follows up with, "I don't need any."

"Huh?"

Sakurako-san loves sweets, but is she denying sugar and milk in her coffee by some turn of events? To my surprise, she seems to be denying the coffee itself. "I'm fine with just water."

"Huh? But, umm…"

"Oh, Sakurako-san doesn't like coffee." I hurry to make an excuse to Fujioka-san's confused wife.

"What do you usually drink? Do you want tea?"

"No, she likes hot chocolate. She doesn't drink tea without something sweet with it. She has a child's tastes."

Right? I look over to confirm with Sakurako-san, but she wrinkles her nose and nods. I can't deny that it's annoying to have your taste called childish.

"I'm sorry, my husband and I aren't very good with sweet things. Even though it's bad for my figure, I just love carbohydrates." The wife laughs playfully.

Although I think it's a bit impolite to laugh, my lips start to loosen because of the wife's oddly charming expression.

"That's right, I have apples. Although my husband said it was for children, I bought a splendid juicer online. I've only used it once, and it was hard, but let's make juice." The wife claps at her good idea.

"I'd love to see the juicer. Could you show it to me?"

Perhaps I should have refrained, but I got drawn in by the wife's cheerful mood. She gets up, and says, "follow me." Utsumi-san objects to me getting up from my seat. As soon as I'm not there to block him, he notices how close Hector is to him. He yells in a miserable voice and curls up in a ball.

The wife peeks into the living room while heading into the kitchen. It seems that it's the space for the baby. There's a small baby sleeping in a crib. The baby looks like its mother.

Towards the kitchen, there's more colour. The walls are monotone, but the ladles and towels are colours like red and orange. Fujioka-san's wife's modest resistance shows through here.

"There we go…"

She slides a chair over to the shelf to stand on it, and tries to reach the juicer from up high. She's standing right in front of me, so I decide to say, "I'll help you." The juicer is heavier than I thought it would be. I thought the juicer would be black, but it's actually red. It seems like a slow juicer without a blade. I read the manual while the wife starts roughly cutting up apples.

The apples are fresh from the Asahikawa suburbs. They're small, with only a bit of

colour, but as soon as she cuts them, fresh juice starts dripping out. My mouth starts to water as the sweet scent of apples fills the kitchen. She seems like she's a good cook. She finished cutting the apples, and puts them in the juicer.

I was sure it would be loud, but it's ten times quieter than our old juicer at my house. I watch the juicer for a while. It's interesting how the pulp comes out the side. I take a little sample, and it's surprisingly rich and delicious. Fujioka-san's wife also says that it's delicious. It's the perfect time, so we take out pineapples, carrots, and tomatoes from the fridge to make into juice. I'm a big fan of home appliances.

"…He mentioned that your companion is a detective, but are you the assistant?" She suddenly asks.

All the multi-coloured cups in front of us somehow looks like a chemistry experiment.

"Umm… Well, something like that."

I quickly lift my head and correct my posture. I've definitely seemed like a child today. I'm probably making Sakurako-san look undependable, since her assistant is a child.

"Utsumi-san… Is really worried about Takeshi-kun, isn't he." She says in quietly, while looking towards the living room. Takeshi-kun is probably Fujioka-san. "Sorry to say something weird. Honestly… I think the curse is stupid. But Utsumi-san is seriously worried, and he even visited us with you two…" She says, then takes a moment to wipe her eyes.

That's right. Sakurako-san and Hector made the atmosphere lighter, but Hector is still a cursed dog, and Fujioka-san is still a cursed man. We came here to help them.

"I'll do my best to help you." I say with my strongest voice. She smiles at me with red eyes. She was feeling alone and anxious.

"-No, the ice will melt and make the juice thin." She takes a piece of paper towel to wipe her eyes, then speaks in a cheerful tone.

I nod, place the glass of juice on a tray, and leave the kitchen. When I look into the living room with the bright glass of fruit juice, I can tell the atmosphere feels different from how it was before I left.

"But I do believe it!" Fujioka-san shouts and hits the table.

Utsumi-san stands up off the sofa and faces Fujioka-san. It's an explosive mood. Hector is in my seat on the sofa, being pet by Sakurako-san. His ears stand up in surprise at the loud noise.

"C-calm down. I didn't say I don't believe you, so don't assume, okay?"

Utsumi-san seems to have noticed that the wife and I have returned, and tries to get Fujioka-san to calm down in a panic. Fujioka-san also notices us, and tightens his lips then sits back on the one-seat sofa. The wife and I somewhat awkwardly distribute fruit juice to everyone. Sakurako-san receives apple and pineapple juice. She drinks one mouthful and makes a sour face, so I hurriedly exchange it for straight apple juice. She still seems upset, and wrinkles her eyebrows, but drinks it little by little.

"…Tomorrow is my 36th birthday. That's how old my father was when he died."

Fujioka-san's serious expression tells us that he thinks we don't believe him. Sakurako-san and I try to talk to him in a polite tone.

"But I heard that you went to the hospital, and they said there weren't any problems, right?"

“That’s right. He went for a medical checkup last month, and they said that his liver is a bit worn out. The doctor insists that he’s healthy.”

Utsumi-san asked, then the wife answers.

“That’s right. I guess you should stop drinking hahaha.”

“This isn’t a laughing matter!” Fujioka-san hits the table. “My father was healthy, too! He wasn’t sick at all until he suddenly died! My uncle was previous owner of this dog. Even though he was healthy until then, his body suddenly broke down and he died.”

Fujioka-san points at Hector. Hector perks up his ears, gets off the sofa, and moves next to Fujioka-san.

“…Anyway, I’m definitely good as dead. I’ve already finished tying up loose ends. It’s reassuring that Utsumi-san says it’s not real, but-“

“This is truly idiotic.”

“Sakurako-san.”

“Your speculation lacks any kind of foundation.”

Sakurako-san has been silently listening, but she suddenly speaks like she can’t stand it anymore. Her tone is unpleasant, and a bit scornful. I bump her with my elbow, but she ignores it.

“There’s no foundation.”

Fujioka-san scoffs. “How?”

Sakurako-san is talking like she’s speaking with an idiot. Fujioka-san stands up, walks to a rack, and comes back with a transparent file.

“Please look at this.”

“What is it?”

It looks like a list of something.

“I gathered a family tree. This is a list of my short-lived relatives. It only goes back 3 generations, but I looked at their ages and illnesses. In some cases, the cause of death was unclear, and some had chronic illnesses. As long as I could find the cause, I investigated it.”

He spreads several pages from the list on the table. I move my glass of juice to the side while I look to keep them from getting wet. At first glance, I can already see that it’s not just one or two people, but quite a lot of them.

“The names of the disease varies. In the past, it’s obvious that people wouldn’t live as long, but… Even in my father and grandfather’s generation, many people have died young. Can you still say I’m overthinking this?” Fujioka-san says while looking at Sakurkao-san.

Sakurako-san glances at him, then looks down at the list. She doesn’t say anything, so I wonder if Fujioka-san thinks she agrees or disagrees with him. With a sad expression, he slumps in his chair, and covers his face with both hands.

“Do you know how it feels to be terrified of sleeping at night? The anxiety of not waking up the next morning… I also thought it was crazy at first. There was a time that I thought I shouldn’t give in to my fate. But it’s different now.” Fujioka-san says quietly while holding his forehead in his left hand. His slightly hoarse voice is filled with his suffering. My chest is starting to feel sore.

I honestly can’t even imagine the dread. Sleeping soundly at night comes naturally to me.

“I can’t escape my fate until I die. I just need to prepare my wife and children to be able to live calmly and freely after my death.”

“Fujioka…”

“Utsumi. I laughed when you became a police officer. But honestly, I think it’s a fitting job for you. It’s the perfect job for you. You’re reliable during an emergency. So I want you to help out my wife and daughter, and protect them for me.”

Fujioka-san sits up and looks at Utsumi-san with a serious expression. Utsumi-san speaks with a voice filled with passion, unlike before.

“What are you talking about? I’m a lazy, irresponsible person. I’m too much trouble to be relied upon!” Utsumi-san laughs like always, but it sounds forced, somehow.

“I’m being serious! Utsumi!” Fujioka-san says in a rough tone.

“W-why would they need my help? Isn’t it your job to protect them? Stop saying you’ll die.”

“I didn’t want them to go through as many hardships, so I wanted to rely on you!”

Fujioka-san drops his glass. Tomato and apple juice spread over the black table. It looks like blood. He raises his head, and looks at his pale-faced wife. Everyone sits, stunned, as the glass rolls, and the juice drips into the floor. Only Sakurako-san is left with the list, as she doesn’t care to take notice of Fujioka-san.

“…Miyuki, get me a cloth.” Fujioka-san chokes out. His wife runs to the kitchen.

I also grab tissues from the nearby rack and use them to stop the juice from flowing off the table anymore. The juice has already ruined the expensive rug (it’s mean to say, but the pattern looks like a Holstein cow to me) by creating a red puddle. Utsumi-san tries to help, but notices Hector, and screams back to the couch. Fujioka-san sighs. However, the dog seems to have no interest in Utsumi-san. He ignores his trembling, and rubs his head on Sakurako-san’s knees.

“…I guess he really likes you.” Fujioka-san finishes wiping off the table, and narrows his eyes while he hands the dish cloth to his wife. “Since he’s a creepy dog, I can’t afford to show him affection.”

“He’s creepy?”

Even though he’s called a cursed dog, Hector is really cute. I just can’t see him as creepy. When I tilt my head, Fujioka-san’s gaze drops to the empty glass.

“Since my uncle was single… and self-employed, no one noticed he collapsed immediately. He was only discovered about a week after his death. That dog… He always stayed next to his owner’s corpse, and he loves dead animals.”

“Dead animals?”

“He isn’t scavenging for food, but he suddenly took off once while we were on a walk, and he found a dead Eurasian tree sparrow… among other things.”

“Ah, and…” I reflexively agree, and look at Sakurako-san. She shrugs indifferently, and pets Hector.

“Kujo-san, do you like dogs?” Fujioka-san asks suddenly.

“Long ago I kept two cats, but I’m not familiar with dogs. I do like bones, though.”

“Bones?”

“Dogs have impressively thick cervical vertebrae. As mammals, they’re no different from

humans. It's just that they don't have a clavicle, and have more thoracic and lumbar vertebrae than humans. Having tails, naturally they have more caudal vertebrae than humans." While speaking, Sakurako-san straightens Hector out, and points to his neck, shoulders, and spine while petting him. He finger shows her gentle love of bones.

In her eyes you can definitely see that she's thinking about how under his puffy fur, skin, and muscle, Hector's bones are lying there.

"Umm…"

"Ah, s-sorry!"

Hector also seems comfortable. I was so focused on her finger that I didn't notice the Fujiokas staring blankly, waiting for an explanation.

"Umm, Sakurako-san's main occupation isn't a detective, but a specimen collector. She makes skeletal specimens of animals."

"Skeletal specimens?"

"Yes, models of skeletons. Like in a museum, or a school."

"…Come to think of it, I saw one of those at the Asahiyama zoo a while ago with my wife. The skull of a deer with big horns. There were lots of exhibits there."

The Fujioka couple is relatively flexible and sensible. When they heard about skeletal specimens, they immediately understood, and never showed any disgust. They might not be thinking about how they're made, though.

"When a specimen is put on display in an exhibition hall, people who aren't interested won't go. At the Asahiyama zoo, there's bones on display in front of each animal enclosure. They want you to observe the animals in front of you after looking at their bones. Animals can move because of the bones at their core."

"Really…"

I also know about the bone panel at Asahiyama zoo. I can't even think about going to an exhibition for that, so I don't understand the wonder in the Fujiokas voices.

"The larger specimens, such as the Asian elephant, are assembled in the garden. I have also helped out several times." Sakurako-san starts talking about a specific story, so I hurriedly interrupt.

"T-that's right. Universities sometimes bring Sakurako-san animal corpses for her to make skeletal specimens from."

I make eye contact with Utsumi-san, who is starting to look pale, as Sakurako-san starts talking about bones.

"Of course, there's not just animal corpses rotting around the house. I do hear dogs have a sense of smell that's hundreds of times better than humans, so surely Sakurako-san has a lot of scents on her."

I know that Sakurako-san picks up dead animals every day, dissects them, and simmers them in a pot, but I don't explain this to the Fujioka couple. Still, the two of them and Hector listen to Sakurako-san for a while, nodding their heads. Fujioka-san stares at Hector and Sakurako-san for a while, before suddenly cutting her off by saying, "I have a favour to ask of you."

"Umm… Will you take Hector after I die?"

"What?"

“He definitely isn’t a bad dog, but I can’t make my wife take care of such a big dog alone… I know it’s a bother, but please, won’t you please take care of him?”

It’s definitely not easy for a single mother with a small child to care for a big dog alone. Still, asking something like that so suddenly…

“I refuse.” Sakurako-san answers clearly, just like I thought she would.

Fujioka-san is disappointed.

“It won’t be necessary, because I don’t believe that you’re going to die.”

Hearing that, the wife sighs with relief. Fujioka-san doesn’t seem convinced, but he still drops his shoulders with disappointment.

“Then how many of his owners have died?”

“Oh, that’s in the documents I put together.”

“Really?”

“The first owner was my uncle’s friend, who died, then my uncle took him. After that, my uncle suddenly died, so a different uncle took him…”

We politely look at the papers. This is the uncle he mentioned. Fujioka-san points at the words “Tatsuo Fujioka, 46 years old, death on 2012/07/20, cirrhosis of the liver.”

“From the start, he was a strange dog. The house where the dog’s parents lived burned down. The owner of the house died, as well as the dog’s parents and sibling. Surprisingly, Hector only had to go to the vet for enteritis. It seems he was lucky enough to escape the fire.” Fujioka-san says while looking at Hector.

We look at Hector, too. He tilts his head to the side, as if to ask, “what is it?” then licks Sakurako-san’s palm.

“I think he’s not only misfortune itself, but also a sign of death. I’m sure… Death has been staying by my side.” Fujioka-san says, while looking at Hector. His eyes are deep black.

“It’s hard to believe a dog has abilities like that… Oh well, let’s investigate it, and your curse as well.”

Fujioka-san looks at Sakurako-san like he wants to say something, but just swallows. If he argues more than this, he’ll become more embarrassed, and he won’t make any progress. Perhaps it’s becoming annoying to talk to her.

“Thank you in advance.” The wife says as she bows.

Fujioka-san also bows his head modestly. Utsumi-san looks at the two of them, then copies them. I sit back down on the sofa, a bit more tense than before. Sakurako-san yawns without covering her mouth.

Part 3

The Fujioka couple gets up, leaving the file with us. I’m a bit uncomfortable, somehow. The wife gets up to feed the baby, and Fujioka-san goes to smoke. Smoking in the house is prohibited because of the little baby, so he goes outside to the garden. When I see Fujioka-san coughing violently, I feel like he should avoid smoking. I don’t particularly hate smoking, but if he doesn’t want to die, he should think more about his body. Hector follows him into the garden. He smiles at us through the glass occasionally, chases little birds, and puts his nose in the grass.

The firewood is in the garden. There's quite a lot, but it still isn't enough to last the winter. I'd like to try splitting some firewood later… I look back inside.

The three of us left in the living room return to looking through the files. There are 3 stacks of files. Copies of the family tree, a list of people who died early, and a list of people who owned Hector. I hold the thickest stack, the list of people who died. Year of death, age, cause of death, and chronic illnesses were all thoroughly investigated.

"…A lot of them definitely passed away while they were still young." I groan, still holding the page.

"Yeah…" Utsumi-san, who has been looking at my list from beside me, agrees.

I knew they were short lived, but I didn't expect this. When I compare it to the family tree that Utsumi-san is holding, it seems even more strange. Fujioka's family is short lived, but they seem to have a lot of children. Among them, it seems like the women are long lived. More than half the men died before reaching 50 years old. Especially Fujioka-san's father. 7 of the 9 people were male, and all seven died before 50 years old. Some even died as young as 15 years old. Thinking about how I'm around the same age gives me a sharp feeling in my chest. The cause of death was heart failure. It's written that he died during a baseball game, I can't help thinking about it. It must have been a really sudden death.

"This is… there really are too many of them." Utsumi-san murmurs and groans. Holding a glass in one hand, he gulps down the juice and nods.

"Hmm" Sakurako-san sits down across from us and exhales shortly. She looks fully satisfied.

"Is something wrong?"

"No. It was just investigating thoroughly." Sakurako-san says suspiciously.

"I mean, if it's related to his own death, of course he'd investigate it thoroughly."

I'm sure he wants to understand it, even just a bit. If there's a way to drive away the grim reaper, I'm sure he'd like to try to find it. Still, there's some unusual causes of death. They're not all the same. When I look the lists, they all have a different cause of death. There's accidental deaths, and deaths from illness. The word "curse" makes me think of something more uniform. Even though there's different reasons, the fact still stands that they all died young.

"…There's a lot of heart failures."

However, it isn't the same for all of them. Among the causes written, heart failure is the most common.

"Heart failure is a generic term for cardiac diseases." Sakurako-san says, without looking at me.

"So in other words, they all died of a heart disease?"

"No. The heart stops when someone dies. If the cause of death is unclear, it's a convenient term to list instead."

"Skin disease… do people usually die from that?" Utsumi-san says from beside me.

He points out one person with a strange cause of death. Instead of a chronic condition, like respiratory disease, it says skin disease. His older brother seems to have suffered from the same disease before dying of renal failure. There seems to be several other people who died of skin or respiratory disease.

"Fatal skin disease, huh? Well, skin cancer is common."

Sakurako-san snorts and leans back in her chair. “For rare ones… That’s right, there’s a disease called Stevens Johnson syndrome. It’s sometimes caused by medication, and it can be fatal. It can also result from allergic reactions.”

Since the exact name of the disease isn’t written, we can’t know for sure… Sakurako-san sit on the sofa and crosses her legs. They’re just as long and beautiful as ever.

“It could have been lung cancer…”

He’s young, and it can progress quickly. I can see Fujioka-san smoking outside through the veranda window. I thought he was going to head back inside, but he starts chopping firewood. The sound is satisfying to hear. I’m surprised at how easy it looks to break. Hector puts his face in a patch of grass, and sways his whole body side to side. He runs in circles a few times, then rolls on his back in the grass. The grass is probably nice and cold.

“…Skin diseases, respiratory diseases, and atopic asthma or something.” Utsumi-san suddenly says.

“What?”

“Since there’s several people with the same disease, it was probably inherited.”

We trace along the family tree with our fingers. I didn’t notice it on the list, but looking at the family tree carefully, it becomes obvious.

“It’s a direct line.” Sakurako-san mutters.

Looking at the family tree, I can see that Fujioka-san’s uncle, grandfather, along with several other people who have unknown causes of death, are closely related. Some of the diseases, such as liver cancer, are connected, but the direct causes of death are sometimes different. It seems like it’s inherited, but the diseases only affect some people.

“Now that I’m thinking of it… Fujioka-san seems to clear his throat a lot.”

I remember him clearing his throat several times during our conversation, so I nod to Utsumi-san.

“He used to have treatment for his asthma when he was in middle school. I’m worried that he’s starting to become a heavy smoker… Well, that’s why it’s called a luxury item.”

I remember Utsumi-san saying that Fujioka-san smokes good cigarettes, so I look to the garden, but I only see Hector, staring blankly.

“When I was a kid, my older sister had serious asthma. It was hard to watch. I wish I could have taken it for her. Especially during an attack, it was really scary when I was a kid, and I was worried she would die…”

His hair bounces a few times, then he puts his hand on the back of his head, and looks down while he talks. He seems to have been reminded of something. Seeing a glimpse of Utsumi-san’s tender feelings makes me want to ease his pain.

“If it was when she was a child, is she better now?”

“Now, due to all the dust while she was moving, her asthma resurfaced after several years. It seems it’s the kind of allergy can be hereditary, so my sister is really worried about her children.”

When he says that, I remember the cute twins he brought to Sakurako-san’s house before. They both had the same curly hair as Utsumi-san, so they looked funny when they’re lined up.

“Fortunately, the twins are both fine – well, except they have the same hair as my sister

and I." Utsumi-san says while pulling on his hair. I accidentally laugh.

They both definitely looked happy and healthy. Apparently the part about the hair concerns Utsumi-san after all. Does his sister really have it, too?

"But you know, naturally curly hair is a dominant trait. By the way, plump ears are dominant traits, as well. In other words, it's better to look like this. Do you understand? Even Buddha has curly hair and plump ears, right?" Utsumi-san talks in his usual cheerfulness, as if to hide his earlier seriousness.

"No, leaving aside the plump ears, wasn't Buddha's hair different from naturally curly hair?"

"Then, is it a punch perm? Do you think old lady Osaka's hair is frizzy? Or, what? Does he do it himself every morning?"

"No, that's weird… Do you know about Mendel's law? That's not what dominant traits mean!"

"Gran said it would be fine for them to visit again."

As I'm joking around with Utsumi-san while we pretend to focus on the list, Sakurako-san suddenly speaks up. Maybe she's trying to hide her embarrassment. I haven't been focusing on the list seriously until now. Nonetheless, I don't need to point it out. I look at Sakurako-san and smile a bit. Recently I've come to understand that Sakurako-san likes children. Is it because they're innocent, unlike adults? For her, children might be easier to talk to.

"But, If it's hereditary…"

I take a deep breath, trying to bring the mood back from earlier by mentioning Fujioka-san's problem.

"You shouldn't be ignorant about what you inherit from your parents."

Although I don't have many memories of my father, people often say we look alike. I certainly do think I resemble him when I see photographs of when he was young. In particular, my maternal grandfather seems to have the same food preferences as me, so maybe that's hereditary, too. Also, Sakurako-san once told me that similar environments causes similar preferences. For example, it's common to feel like there's fate between relatives that don't usually meet, as if it's in their blood. They sometimes experience a feeling of "oh, we're related." In that case… this curse could also be hereditary.

"There really are a lot of short-lived relatives. Although there are fatal hereditary disorders, there are also cases where there's no clear explanation." Sakurako-san says as if she can hear the voice in my head.

"Then is it something like a curse, or maybe divine punishment after all?"

"I don't believe in supernatural stories like spirits or curses. If an unexplainable event occurs, there just isn't a scientific explanation that has been discovered yet. Unfortunately, not everything in this world has been analyzed yet." Sakurako-san takes a drink of her apple juice before she continues. "Within a family, there tends to be similar lifestyles and habits, so it's no wonder similar trends in diseases occur. Cancer and diabetes have a high chance of being inherited. Allergies, however, are not hereditary. It's even said that a person's sense of taste could be related to inheritance. Though the studies were done on chimpanzees, there does seem to be a connection. Since their genes match human's by 99%, the results are likely the same as with humans. As a result, it's highly likely that the members of a group will like the

same foods. Eating habits are directly linked with a person's health."

"So you're saying that genetics play a factor in the reason the family is short lived, right?"

"That's right." Sakurako-san nods.

"In that case, since Fujioka is healthy right now, he doesn't have anything to worry about, right?" Utsumi-san asks to confirm.

Sakurako-san thinks for a moment, then tilts her head slightly. "I'm not a doctor, so I can't know for sure if he's really healthy."

"I guess that's right…"

"Diseases can progress quickly, especially in young people," Sakurako-san adds.

Utsumi-san slumps his shoulders.

"Anyway, If you want to test for hereditary disorders, you'd need to order a proper examination. I can't deny that something could be overlooked in a general health exam."

There's a sound like nails against the door, then the sound of panting coming towards us. Utsumi-san hurriedly tucks his legs onto the sofa again. At the same time, a white furball jumps into the living room.

"Welcome back, Hector."

Hector quickly puts his nose on my lap to greet me, then goes back to Sakurako-san. He puts his whole face on her lap.

"Did you think of anything?"

Fujioka-san walks back with relaxed footsteps. He quietly clears his throat and asks us. He smells like cigarettes, with the faint smell of chocolate.

"Hey, Fujioka. Are you sure you had asthma?" Utsumi-san asks.

"Ah, I still have trouble with it now."

In the case, maybe he shouldn't be smoking. Even if I think that, I can't say it. Utsumi-san called them "luxury items or something" so I guess it's an adult thing. Even if they're bad for your body, you can enjoy what you like. That's what I think.

"Did your uncle have it, too?"

"I don't know, why?"

Utsumi-san keeps asking questions, but Fujioka-san just shrugs his shoulders. He asks about dietary habits, and other small things, but Fujioka-san only gives vague answers like, "I don't know," or, "I don't remember." After a while, his wife, who has apparently lulled the baby to sleep, pokes her head in.

"Hey, could I asks you do go a little shopping for me." She says, gesturing towards Fujioka-san.

"Can't you go?"

"Nozomi is asleep. If I move her, she'll wake up, but it'd be a problem if she woke up while I was gone. Please!" Fujioka's wife begs him in a voice that makes it sound like she's holding back.

"I want to serve our guests cake, but I've run out of fresh cream."

"Oh, no, it doesn't matter." I say while standing up.

She holds up her hand, gesturing me to sit down again.

"No. I used to be a chef. It's in my nature to make sure guests never leave with empty stomachs." She says to me, then looks back to Fujioka-san.

“If you do this for me, I’ll let you eat some delicious food in return.” When she says it like that, I don’t think Fujioka-san can disagree.

He gives a bitter smile, then turns to us. “…I’ll be out for a little bit.”

In response to those words, Hector gets up and rushes next to Fujioka-san. I admire how smarts and loyal he is.

“Thank you, be careful.”

The wife sees Fujioka-san off from the living room with a smile. He calmly gets into his black car. After we watch him drive away, the wife turns to us.

“Well then, do you have anything to talk about with me?” She says suddenly, which surprises me. “He isn’t good at talking about himself or his family… I think he’s scared that people won’t be able to relate to him. He really is a coward.” She has an elegant smile.

“When did he start saying he was going to die?”

“When?”

My question must have been unexpected, since she tilts her head and repeats it.

“Let’s see… At least since before he met me. Maybe it was ever since he learned about it? If it was since he was a child, Utsumi-san would know better than me, right?”

“Huh?” Utsumi-san straights his posture in response to suddenly being spoken about.

“What was he like as a child?” I ask. Utsumi-san crosses his arms and thinks for a moment.

“Let’s see… Fujioka was kinda serious… He never acted very child-like. Since he was from Tokyo, the other kids would make fun of him, and talk about him behind his back.”

“Oh my.” Suddenly hearing this gossip, the wife laughs nervously.

“But he wasn’t like that at all when I got to know him, he’s a very kind man. He’s just su~per guarded, like he has armour around his heart.”

As Utsumi-san continues, the wife laughs. “Right, he’s easy to misunderstand,” she says, nodding.

“At first, I also thought he was the kind of person I wouldn’t get along with. I thought he was the nasty, rude type. But… He isn’t like that at all.”

His first impression certainly wasn’t good for me, either. Still, with people like Utsumi-san and his wife talking about him like this, I’m sure he’s not a bad person. He’s just easy to misunderstand, like Sakurako-san.

“In middle school, a crow chick fell from its nest in a tree at the school. The teachers said not to go near it, since the parents would attack. But Fujioka said, ‘it’ll die like this,’ so we both helped it.”

“Really? Wasn’t it dangerous?”

Parent crows can be brutal. There used to be a crow nest near the sidewalk by my house. The city workers removed it right away, but the crow rebuilt its nest in the same place, and kept attacking people walking by. Eventually, the tree was cut down and replaced with a flower bed. Crows are terrifying.

“That’s right. The parent crow was really angry! So the two of us tried to pick it up, but the mom caused a big uproar and attacked us. But we still helped it, and took it to a veterinary clinic, but-“

“It didn’t make it?” Utsumi-san is interrupted.

Sakurako-san, who has been silent until now, calmly speaks. Utsumi-san looks sad, and he nods.

“The chick lost the protection of its parents when it fell, and it got hurt. I regret not being able to help it.” Utsumi-san lets out a deep sigh. “Fujioka took it to the vet to try to help it, but I couldn’t do anything, so I felt really down… Honestly, I thought he was pathetic at first for being so upset about a bird, but then I started feeling like I didn’t want It to die, either…” Utsumi-san forces a smile. “He’s pretty serious now, and he’s sensitive to life and death. I wonder if something happened with his family. When his father died, he was strangely calm, like he had already prepared himself for the worst. I remember that clearly.”

Utsumi-san puts both hands over his face and sighs. It seems he got overwhelmed from his sad memories. He seems like he’s having a hard time holding back his tears. I look away, but Sakurako-san gives him a tissue box.

“Really… you’re a kind person.” I smile at Sakurako-san, then I try not to look at Utsumi-san while the wife talks.

“When I met him, he was a more aggressive person. It was like he was covered in thorns. He was really desperate to go against fate. Even at work he was very strong-willed. He was even nicknamed ‘risk taker’.” The wife laughs.

It seems strange to call him a risk taker. Actually, maybe it’s by taking risks that he was able to have such a nice house like this.

“But since he was stubborn, his heart grew colder. As his feelings got weaker, he became bitter…” Saying that, the wife inhales.

I feel a bit guilty and uncomfortable about hearing this story from someone else. She surely feels the same way. After showing a bit of hesitation on her face, she resumes her story.

“I’m the daughter of the owners of a western-style restaurant he went to. Even with the delicious food and alcohol, he still looked like he had a gap in his heart. When I helped out at the store, I noticed he looked like he was deep in thought… When I started talking to him, I felt like I couldn’t leave him alone.” She seems a bit embarrassed to tell us about her relationship with Fujioka-san. “So I decided I wanted to share his pain and fight it with him, then I married him. …But even if we’re married, we’re separate people. Even if our last names are the same, we don’t share a soul. Marriage can’t change a person’s true nature.” She says solemnly, then glances at the sleeping baby in the room across from the kitchen.

I look where she is looking. I can see a dark brown crib, and a small, brightly coloured stuffed animal.

“But children are different. Children can change people. They can fill broken fragments from a person’s soul. I thought having a child would definitely change him. I thought after she was born, he would hope to keep living, but he didn’t… He became terrified of dying.”

“Isn’t that better? It’s better than living recklessly.”

“No.” She quickly shakes her head at my words.

“Day after day, he was busy with work, investing, and trading stocks. He wanted to leave a lot of money for us for when he died. I was shocked. He was always fighting, but now… He accepts his death.”

“He accepts it…”

“He has already prepared to pass away.”

The wife bites her lip and nods. Utsumi-san hits his elbow against the sofa in frustration.

"That… That's cowardly…" I groan.

"Until now, I've laughed off his mentions of dying, even after we took Hector and that supposed cured painting. These are the times you have to keep doing your best… but he suddenly started acting weird after the baby was born."

"Cured painting?"

Sakurako-san suddenly sits up, even though he seemed bored while listening until now.

"Yes, but it's just an ordinary painting of a forest. Since the owners have died one after another, it's a bad omen. He inherited it because it's a valuable painting from generations ago, passed down through his family. It doesn't really fit the house."

"Are you not going to hang it up?" Sakurako-san asks.

"No, it's not to his liking."

An ordinary landscape painting would certainly look out of place in this room. I'm uncomfortable with the thought of a cursed painting, too.

"Since his birthday is coming up, I guess it's too much for him. His father in law died. He thinks it's his turn next. His asthma has gotten worse over the past month. The doctor visits have probably also caused him stress."

We can suddenly hear the sound of a motor, and the garage door opening. The wife quickly gets up off the sofa. Fujioka-san has come back.

"I didn't know what to do about this on my own. That's why I'm glad you came here today… Honestly, thank you!" She bows to us. "I think it's a good start. Even if there is no curse, I don't like stories. So please, try to help him." She says, then disappears into the kitchen.

At almost the exact same time, we hear Hector's footsteps and breathing coming closer.

"Welcome back." The wife says, appearing from the kitchen. She greets Fujioka-san with a smile.

In addition to fresh cream, Fujioka-san also has a transparent container with plums and grapes.

"Oh, you didn't have to bother with going to the direct sales office."

"I was nearby. Didn't you say before that she should eat fruits as well as drink milk?"

"Then it's for Nozomi, not me?" She says, staring at Fujioka-san.

"You'd be happy if Nozomi grew up healthy, right?"

"I guess so, but-"

The two of them argue in the kitchen. They seemed like such a happy couple, so I feel bad that they're angry. I turn around, and see Utsumi-san grimacing.

"…At this point, we might as well perform a ritual."

"What?"

"The curse has been lifted! Like that. Basically, I want Fujioka-san to just realizes that it's all superstition." Utsumi-san says in a hushed voice.

Sakurako-san pets Hector and squints. She ignores us, and looks at the family tree instead.

"…But is it really superstition?"

"Huh?"

Of course, it would be nice to help Fujioka-san. I don't know if doing a silly ritual could

convince him. Can it really save him?

"What if, just maybe, something is actually wrong? People have actually died. They're also all men. Something is weird about this."

Utsumi-san groans. Even though I have been talking like there is no curse, the men in Fujioka-san's family really is short lived. If it was men and women equally, it would be more convincing, but it's exclusively men. There's too many cases for it to be just a coincidence.

"Still, no matter how many times you say it, I don't believe in curses. It's probably just a hereditary heart disease. The heart looks healthy, then just suddenly stops."

"And it only affects men?"

I look towards the kitchen while I ask Sakurako-san. Indeed, they seemed healthy… That matches Fujioka-san's father's story, and there also seems to be many cases of death by heart failure. But what's the reason for only men dying young?

"That's right."

"Huh?"

"This disease seems to be strange in the fact that only the men have symptoms."

Sakurako-san is smiles while she looks at me. She seems proud of my suggestion.

"But before that, we have something else to worry about."

Before she tells me what it is, I notice Fujioka-san entering the living room, so I stand up to welcome him back.

"It's lunchtime, and the wind seems to have calmed down since earlier, so I asked Miyuki if we should eat in the garden. Should I open a light wine? If you'd like to stay-"

"Show me your hands." Sakurako-san straightforwardly grabs his hand that isn't holding the wine while he tries to talk to us. It's so sudden that Fujioka-san can only blink in confusion.

"What?"

"Your hands. I want to see your fingernails. Will you show them to me?"

"Yeah…"

What is she saying? Fujioka-san hands the wine bottle to Utsumi-san, and shows his hands to Sakurako-san with a doubtful expression. Sakurako-san takes his hands and gives a rising whistle.

"Have your nails been like this since birth?"

"My nails?"

Fujioka-san looks at Sakurako-san in confusion. I get curious and look at his hands. Fujioka-san's nails are awfully pale. They have thick, horizontal lines across them.

"You see the lines on the nail? It's called the Mees' line. Did these appear recently?"

"Ah… yes. The doctor said I might be a little anemic."

"Certainly, anemia can cause cases of lines on the nails. However, those lines are usually vertical. There would also be no pigmentation like this. There is another cause of this."

"Another cause…?" Fujioka-san makes a puzzled expression as he repeats Sakurako-san's words.

She nods, then lets go of his hand.

"You said your asthma has gotten worse over the past month, right? Ever since the humidity levels have started rising?"

"Now that I think about it… That's right."

Sakurako-san nods, then says, “last question.” I can hear Utsumi-san gulp nervously from beside me.

“About that painting.”

“The painting…?” Fujioka-san asks, looking at the abstract painting on the living room wall.

“Not that one. The cursed painting. The one you inherited. You chose to hang it up, didn’t you? It’s a spot your wife and child don’t go to often.”

“Why do you…?”

“Dear! I told you I was worried about keeping it!” Suddenly, the wife yells at Fujioka-san.

“When I feel tired after work, it makes me feel better to look at it, so I hung it up in my office. You might not have known because you don’t go in there…”

Apparently they get into an argument every time the wife tries to clean or reorganize, so she doesn’t go in. It seems like nobody enters that room except for Fujioka-san himself.

“You could have at least said one word about it!”

“I didn’t mean to hide it, I just-“

“That’s enough. You two can discuss this on your own later. For now, take me to the office.” Sakurako-san says, lightly stroking Hector’s head while those two start arguing. “I’ll figure out your curse.”

Part 4

Fujioka-san’s office is on the second floor. It’s a big house to start with, but the long hallways make it seem even bigger. The office is at the end of the second floor, and it’s across from a large closet.

“I want to keep my work away from the baby’s bedroom and ours. I get distracted when I hear noises from there.”

We follow behind Fujioka-san as he guides us. The wife seems a bit angry still, but she doesn’t say anything.

“This is it.”

Fujioka-san stops in front of a black door. Sakurako-san reaches out to open the door. Fujioka-san has a dissatisfied expression for a moment, but Sakurako-san still opens it. Then, she tries to stop Fujioka-san from entering.

“Don’t get any closer.”

“Huh?”

“Only I will go in.”

“No, but…”

“It’s probably dangerous.” Sakurako-san says clearly.

The wife gasps behind me. Sakurako-san glances at her, then puts on her nitrile gloves before entering the room. I quickly grab her arm.

“You’re being a nuisance, boy.”

“No. If it’s dangerous, I won’t let you go.”

In that case, I should go. Utsumi-san steps between us, saying, “no no no no.”

“If it’s dangerous, it should be my job!”

“Honestly, you’re…” Sakurako-san looks at us and sighs, realizing how serious we are. “It can’t be helped. Try to breathe as little as possible.”

“Breathe?”

“Ah, just cover your mouth with a handkerchief or something.”

I take the handkerchief I leant to Sakurako-san a while ago out of my pocket, and cover my mouth. Since it was used to wipe Hector’s drool, it reeks of dog. It seems like Utsumi-san didn’t bring a handkerchief. The wife takes disposable masks out of a box for us. Fujioka-san puts on a mask and follows us. Even though she doesn’t say anything, the wife is frowning. I guess she doesn’t want him doing anything dangerous if he doesn’t have to.

“The painting is behind that desk.”

Fujioka-san’s office is beautifully organized. All his files are organized, and he has a black notebook laptop and a desktop. Everything is black as always. There’s a metallic, monochrome globe on the desk. The only colour is the painting behind the desk.

“Is this the painting?” Utsumi-san asks.

“Yes. Originally, it was my great grandfather’s, then my grandfather and uncles inherited it, and it’s finally my turn. Apparently it was painted several centuries ago.”

“The green is beautiful.”

The painting is so beautiful that I can’t imagine it would be cursed. It’s a dense forest, with one fallen tree. The sunlight is shining against the mossy wood. There’s no life, just a quiet stillness. It’s a gentle, calm painting.

“It’s Scheele’s green. It was a pigment used in paintings until emerald green paint was invented. This painting was probably drawn between the 18th and 19th century.”

“Is it bad for your health?”

“It contains an arsenic compound.”

“What?! Arsenic is poison, isn’t it?!”

Sakurako-san easily answers my question. I look at Fujioka-san with surprise. Fujioka-san looks back at me with a pale face. The wife is clinging to Hector, looking like she’s about to collapse.

“There’s nothing to be surprised about. Arsenic is a common compound in paint. We know it’s poisonous now, but people used to use it for skin whitening and makeup. It’s not a problem that it’s used in the paint itself.”

Sakurako-san stands on her toes to take the painting off the wall. Utsumi-san and I help. This was my first time holding to a painting. It’s heavier than I thought it would be. It’s definitely a nice painting. I remember seeing a show with an actor working as an apprentice to an Italian picture framer for a while, it was really impressive. We carefully place the painting on the desk. I want to wash my hands after touching it, but I’m worried about what Sakurako-san will do, so I don’t want to leave. Utsumi-san feels the same way. He wipes his hands off on his pants while he watches Sakurako-san.

“You said you didn’t always have this picture up, right?”

“Yeah, I just took it out recently.”

“Was it stored in poor conditions? Especially with the weather over the past few days. September is the time of year with the most rain.” Sakurako-san turns the picture over.

“Ah…”

If you look closely, there’s a hazy, whitish stain spreading on the back of it.

“Mold. Due to condensation, the back of paintings is often a breeding ground for mold. A mold, such as scopulariopsis, is what is cursing this painting.”

Sakurako-san removes the back of the picture to check that the mold has started to grow on the back side, and frowns while she puts it back. She walks toward the window.

“This is just my guess, but there’s probably a large amount of arsenic in this painting. During the summer, the humidity grows mold rapidly, causing an arsenic outbreak. Do you smell garlic in this room sometimes?”

“Come to think of it…” Fujioka-san nods.

In such an avant-garde house, the windows seem unusual. After a bit of struggling, Sakurako-san opens the window and fresh air floods into the room. The wind pushes her beautiful, black hair.

"Inflammation of the respiratory organs, keratinization of the skin… these are symptoms seen in arsenic poisoning. Your nails are also evidence that your body has been harmed. It’s written in ancient books that the bones of those with arsenic poisoning have purple spots… Were there spots on your uncle’s bones? Or is that just superstition?”

Sakurako-san takes off her mask, and breathes in the fresh air. She leans against the window and turns toward us.

“Your uncle also died during the rainy season in Tokyo. He also kept this picture close to him, right?”

“…That’s right. It wasn’t at home, but he put it in the room he borrowed at work.” Fujioka-san nods again.

“When arsenic poisoning becomes chronic, it can cause skin keratinization, and other diseases of the respiratory system, digestive system, and cancer. This poisoning can place a heavy burden on the liver and kidneys. I’m sure your uncle also died on liver cirrhosis.”

“Then because of this painting, my uncle…”

“Of course I can’t investigate his body, so I can’t be certain. I can even see symptoms of arsenic poisoning on your body.”

“No way…” Fujioka-san drops to his knees. He covers his face with both hands and lets out a low groan.

Utsumi-san puts his hand on Fujioka-san’s shoulder, and urges him to leave the room.

“Well, fortunately you have a mild case. You should immediately dispose of this picture or change how it’s stored, and get the appropriate medical treatment. You’ll be fine, you aren’t going to die.”

Fujioka-san slowly leaves the room while his wife clings to him. He buries his face in his wife’s neck and soft hair, and hugs her tightly.

“This is one of your curses. Be sure… to thank your friend and wife. The way it was, you were going to be killed by that painting.”

“One of them? You still have more to say?!” The wife cries loudly.

“Yes. It’s about your family lineage – in your family, men of your family die of heart disease. Moreover, you said your father was healthy until his health declined abruptly, right?”

“Yes, that’s right. My father died two months after being told there’s no problems on his

physical examination."

Sakurako-san dumps over a garbage bag and pours the shredded paper all over the floor. She picks up the bag, puts the painting in, and closes it tightly. Even if it's not completely sealed off, it's better than having it hung up like it was before.

"This is just my guess, but the cause was disappointing, wasn't it?"

"Dis…?! S-sakurako-san!"

It's not good to joke around at times like this. I scold her.

"What I said wasn't a joke. Sometimes people can suddenly die of stress. When someone is exposed to a lot of stress, their adrenal glands swell and excrete excess cortisol. Then, after several months, they start to wear down. When the adrenal cortex stops producing, it can be seriously life threatening."

Sakurako-san gently touches the area just above her belly button with her hand. That's probably where the "adrenal glands" are.

"Also, a large amount of cortisol can greatly increase the risk of cardiovascular disease. This is just my guess, but could you family have a genetic problem with your coronary artery? Issues like poor placement or have a malformed one aren't exactly rare. It said that your uncle who died in his teens died during a baseball game. Even if there are problems with the coronary artery, it usually doesn't cause problems with living a normal life. Intense exercise puts a huge burden on the heart."

"Coronary artery…?" Fujioka-san wrinkles his eyebrows and shakes his head. "It's nothing like that! Both my dad and I have been told by the doctor that there's nothing wrong after getting examined!"

"Unfortunately, it isn't something tested for in a regular examination. You won't know unless you get a CT scan of your coronary arteries, so it makes a 3D computer image of them. The doctor will put a catheter with a contrast agent in the blood vessel, then perform a coronary angiography examination."

"But… Then why is it only men?"

I clench my first over my heart while Fujioka-san asks more questions. Sakurako-san shrugs her shoulders.

"There are individual differences with cortisol secretion levels, but men generally have more than women. Apparently women are more resistant to stress. On the other hand, men can die from the shock of a broken heart." She says, smiling.

It's a mean smile. It gives me a bad feeling. I'm sure Sakurako-san hasn't felt the pain of losing someone she loves.

"Also, young men usually experience more stress from work. It's not surprising they'd die at a young age."

I've heard the statistics for suicide are 2:1 with more men. Women seem to do it for health reasons, but men are more likely to do it for work or money related reasons.

"Stress from work…" A deep sigh leaks through Fujioka-san's mask. "My father died… in 1991." He says, putting a hand on his forehead.

I don't know what the significance of that year is, so I wait for Fujioka-san to continue. Sakurako-san notices, and slowly shakes her head.

"The economy bubble collapsed."

“Oh…”

That’s enough of an explanation for me. Sakurako-san tells us to get out of the room, so we leave.

“If we know the cause, there’s ways to prevent it before anything happens. That’s one curse of yours. How does it feel? Knowing that it wasn’t an interesting story. Don’t worry. You won’t die. There’s no such thing as supernatural curses.” Sakurako-san says while the Fujioka couple tries to collect themselves in the hallway.

The wife nods with tears in her eyes, gentle rubbing Fujioka-san’s back. Fujioka-san makes a loud noise. He’s crying. Thinking about how he’s held up until now, I wouldn’t be surprised if he kept crying for a month.

“What? If you open up a curse, this is what it’s like. Sure, your family has a tendency to be short lived. But not everyone is dead. When people’s coincidences overlap, people think there’s something mysterious about it. If there is a hereditary cardiovascular abnormality in your family, it isn’t surprising that several people have died from it. Truth can sometimes be stranger than fiction. If there’s a possibility, even a small one, amazing things can happen in reality. As a result, coincidences overlap, and it leads to curses and delusions.”

She then pulls out the list from her back pocket and tears it up. The white printer paper is picked up by the wind from the open window in the hallway, and dances like a little tornado.

“Do you understand now? There’s no reason for you to just give up and die.”

“It’s just like I said! You absolutely can’t die!” Fujioka-san’s wife lets go of him, then speaks strongly. “There isn’t a curse. You and I are going to live to be one hundred years old, have a beautiful grandchild, and be a great grandfather and a great grandmother!”

“Miyuki…”

Tears spill out of their eyes. I look next to me at Utsumi-san, who murmurs, “I’m glad, really glad,” and starts to cry. I smile wryly, but I like this kind police officer, so I hand him my dog scented handkerchief from my pocket.

“Now, let’s go to the hospital, right this minute.” Soon the wife smiles with red eyes, and hits Fujioka-san’s arm.

“My uncle’s acquaintance is a cardiovascular doctor. If you see him, you won’t need to worry. I will be sure to mention the arsenic when I talk to him. Lend me your phone.” Sakurako-san says, then looks back at the picture again.

“You can also change the painting’s frame, or contact an art gallery to see if it can be repaired. Throwing it out would be a waste, it’s a good painting. Surely you can find another way to deal with it.”

“That’s right… but first, I have to go wash my face. I can’t go out like this.”

Fujioka-san wipes his tears with the sleeve of his black jacket. His face is still covered in tears.

“Hahaha, you don’t look like yourself.” Utsumi-san is smiling while crying.

His smile spreads to everyone like a ripple, but Hector is just staring at us curiously with his black eyes.

Part 5

When the baby wakes up, we go back to the first floor. Fujioka-san goes into the washroom to wash his face and fix his clothes. The wife brings the baby into the living room where we are. Utsumi-san and I drink iced coffee on the sofa and talk to the wife, who is holding the baby, about the recent weather and general gossip. We avoid the topic of Fujioka-san, since it could make her anxious.

“Are you okay, Hector?”

Since his master disappeared, Hector seems upset with being left alone in the living room, and he keeps barking at the closed door. Utsumi-san trembles, and looks incredibly scared.

“Shut up the dog, boy, make it quiet.” Sakurako-san says to me angrily while holding the telephone receiver.

Sakurako-san is calling her uncle’s doctor acquaintance with the Fujioka family’s phone. She leans against the table, grimacing.

“Keep him quiet… Hey, Hector, come play over here.”

I borrow a toy for him from the wife. It was originally for the baby, so it’s soft, but this rubber ball seems to be Hector’s favourite toy. I throw it a few times before he finally goes to chase it. Utsumi-san screams as soon as Hector runs by him.

“Geez, Utsumi-san. Hector isn’t scary. Please get used to him already.”

“No, animals are like… they give me goosebumps.”

“Are you really that pathetic?!”

Utsumi-san climbs up on the back of the sofa and trembles. The wife and I laugh at him.

“It might be good that we only have Hector now. Our cat brings lizards into the house while we were gone.”

“Lizards?!” Utsumi-san and I say together in surprise.

“Yes. I was surprised at first, but they’re unexpectedly cute.” She laughs with a mischievous expression. “They’re a somewhat unusual species, so we liked to show them off when guests start drinking.”

I think I’d like to see them if they’re cute, but Utusumi-san’s face turns pale.

“I’ll definitely never drink here…”

“Oh! Please don’t say that. When Takeshi-kun’s condition improves, please come visit again. I’d love to thank you.”

“I’ll prepare lots of snacks,”she says, putting her face against the baby’s.

Seeing her happy smile makes me happy, too. I’d definitely like to eat the snacks she prepares next time.

“Still, it was really nice that Utsumi-san came here.”

“No, I didn’t do anything. It was all thanks to Kujo-san…”

When he’s embarrassed or in trouble, Utsumi-san always scratches the back of his frizzy hair.

“Yes, I’m really grateful to her, but you’re the one who brought her here. Besides-“

The wife puts her hand over her mouth while she speaks to lower her voice a bit.

“-He was so excited all morning because his important friend is coming today.”

“Important friend?” Utsumi-san blinks curiously.

“Yes, his close friend.”

“C-close friend?!” Surprised, Utsumi-san slides down the back of his seat.

“Oh my, are it not, Utsumi-san?” The wife asks while giggling as she looks at Utsumi-san’s red face.

“No, that’s not it, it’s just, I’m happy but… I didn’t know he thought that. He never responded to the letters I sent…” Utsumi-san looks down and sniffles.

“I’m stupid, but that guy… I told him he was my best friend in middle school when we still hung out. For me, it was a time I’ll never forget.” Utsumi-san says shyly while sniffling. While trying to sound as clear as possible, his happiness eventually seeps into his voice. “Well, If that’s the case, I’ll have to contact him more often. I only recently found out he came back to Asahikawa.”

“Really…”

I suddenly remember my important childhood friend that moved away from Asahikawa while I was in middle school. Recently we’ve both neglected contacting each other, but I’ll email them after a long time when I go home. A question suddenly comes to my mind while I’m thinking.

“Huh? Then… in that case, why did he suddenly call Utsumi-san again?”

“Surely it’s because I’m a good person.”

“Utsumi-san!”

Utsumi-san puffs out his chest. I accidentally became the straight-man.

“Noo, ahaha. Actually, we met up while he was walking his dog, then we started catching each other up on what we’ve been doing. He was surprised when I told him I’m a police officer. I was always irresponsible, so he laughed at me hahaha.” Utsumi-san laughs.

Behind us, Hector is still barking intensely. Sakurako-san is looking at us with a fed up look and one hand over the receiver.

“Hey, Hector, stop that!”

Finally, the baby starts to cry, so the wife scolds at Hector. Hector rushes over to Sakurako-san, puts his hand on her knee, and barks desperately. It seems there isn’t any choice but to open the door.

“Sorry, Hector. Sakurako-san has a very important phone call…”

In an effort to calm him down, I lean over to Sakurako-san and start talking to Hector. However, before I can finish talking, Sakurako-san grabs my neck tightly.

“Sakurako-san?!”

“Definitely… but why *Utsumi* now? He has other friends, as well. Why did he invite a lazy man that he can’t rely on?” She has a very serious look. Her pale cheeks are a bit flushed, so I think she’s angry.

“No, it’s because of my integr-“

“Utsumi-san!” I shout.

I notice that Sakurako-san has a menacing look, so this isn’t the time to play around.

“Your integrity isn’t the problem. Why now? Why this exact timing?”

“Well, umm… it’s because he’s the same age as his father was when he died now… right?”

I manage to squeeze out, despite how much pain my throat is in.

“The people in his family didn’t all die at a fixed age. The ages were all over the place. Even if it’s his birthday, that doesn’t mean he should rush to assume he’ll die.”

“Sa…?”

“…Where is Fujioka?” Sakurako-san looks around.

“He is taking a while. Maybe he went to the bathroom?”

“Ah… He said he’d wash his face after cleaning up the firewood. When he goes out to smoke, he always leaves the firewood and axe out. He says it’s not good for crime prevention if it’s cleaned up…” The wife adds, “he’s still taking a while,” and tilts her head to the side.

“Umm… Sakurako-san, it hurts…”

“That’s not it.”

“Huh?”

I can hear someone’s voice from the phone. Sakurako-san grabs my neck with a serious expression.

“Sakurako-san, you’re on the phone…”

“It’s not right! We’ve been tricked!”

“Huh?!”

Sakurako-san rudely tosses away the phone, and pushes me away.

“That hurt-“

“The garden!” Sakurako-san yells at the wife, completely ignoring how she just pushed me over.

“Utsumi! Come!”

Sakurako-san quickly throws the door open and starts running as soon as she calls Utsumi-san. Seeing how urgent Sakurako-san is, he follows her immediately. Hector runs after her, too. I make eye contact with the wife, then we both hurry to chase them. It looks like Sakurako-san went out barefoot. I run out of the entrance with her sneakers in hand. The garden is just around this corner. I only catch a glimpse of Sakurako-san as she turns.

“Fujiokaaaa!”

In just a moment, Utsumi-san’s voice echoes through the garden.

“Utsumi-san!”

I hurry around the corner, and see Fujioka-san laying on the ground, next to the stump for chopping firewood on.

“Ugh”

As I run forward, I can smell the thick scent of blood. It’s a salty, metallic smell. I can see Fujioka-san, stained in blood.

“Takeshi-kun!” The wife comes up behind me, holding the baby, and screams.

“Boy! The ambulance!”

Sakurako-san tells me sharply, while she puts on her nitrile gloves. I quickly take out my smartphone and listen to the wife tell me the address. She’s very flustered, but eventually she gets her words out. I quickly dial 119. The call connects right away.

“This is the fire department. Are you calling about a fire, or a medical emergency?”

“Oh, uhh, a medical emergency! An ambulance, please!”

“Tell them he was cut with an axe!” Sakurako-san yells at me.

The smell of blood growing more intense, my heart is pounding, and my voice is shaking.

It looks like Fujioka-san cut his leg. The blood is flowing out from just above his knee. Beside him is the axe, broken and covered in blood.

“Utsumi, take off your belt!”

“Huh?”

“Hurry! It’s to stop the bleeding!”

Sakurako-san takes Utsumi-san’s belt, then ties it around Fujioka-san’s leg. I tell the person on the phone that my acquaintances was cut by an axe. The bleeding is pretty intense, but when I hear the strong response from the phone, I calm down a little.

“They will be here soon.”

When I say that, Sakurako-san gives me an ambiguous expression. Calling the ambulance for non-emergency reasons is common these days. I hear that arrival times are often slow because of it, so I’m really hoping they come quickly. The wife hugs her baby and sobs.

“Fortunately, he didn’t hit a major artery. Still, he’s bleeding a lot. He needs treatment soon. Also, if we stop the bleeding like this for too long, the leg will become necrotized.”

Still, there’s no better alternative. Sakurako-san looks bitter.

“What happened, Fujioka?”

“The… The axe suddenly broke…”

“No, it didn’t. This wasn’t an accident, it was intentional.”

“Huh?!”

Fujioka-san painfully responds to Utsumi-san’s question, but Sakurako-san rejects his answer.

“Besides the deep cut, there’s another cut of hesitation. You tried to pass off your suicide as an accident.”

“T-that’s…”

“If it was damaged to the point it broke, someone would’ve noticed.” Sakurako-san clearly says. She picks up the axe and carefully moves her gloves hand along the blood covered handle. “…As I thought. The handle is only bent one way. This was broken intentionally by having a strong force applied to one side. Furthermore, it was on the side. Considering how an axe is used, it’s unnatural for it to break like this.”

Now that I think about it, it would be weird for it to break on the side from being swung downward.

“This man broke the axe himself. He cut himself while making it seem like an accident.”

“Fujioka wouldn’t try to kill himself! Right, Fujioka?!” Utsumi-san assures us it’s impossible. However, Fujioka-san doesn’t respond. “…Fujioka?”

It’s silent for a moment.

“There’s no way you’d try to cut yourself…”

“…How… did you know?”

“Dear!?”

After a while, Fujioka-san finally answers in a hoarse voice.

“You didn’t welcome me here.” Sakurako-san says while shrugging her shoulders.

“That was…”

“No. You were uncooperative with us. You claimed to be scared of the curse, but you

made no attempt to escape it. At first, I wondered if I had overlooked something, but I couldn't shake my unease." Sakurako-san says while she carefully takes care of Fujioka-san. Her white socks are stained with blood. "You even took in this cursed dog, and willingly hung up the cursed painting. If you were really scared of the curse, you would have tried to keep them away. And yet, you still volunteered to take them on. Your behaviour was strange, and went against your survival instincts." After saying that, Sakurako-san slowly looks around the Fujioka's house.

Then, with a huff, she smiles. It's a lonely smile.

"….Black is usually thought of as the colour of death, but it's really not. In psychology, black is the colour of wanting to fight, escaping the fear of death, and struggling against death. Black isn't despair, it's hope. It's the colour of people who "want to live". You were desperately trying to escape death. I wonder if you had already accepted that colour. You knew death was calling you."

With those words, I feel a tight pressure in my chest. It's just black… I'm somehow ashamed of myself for thinking like that. He lives while unconsciously wearing black armour so he doesn't give in to the curse…

"Besides finding the date of each family member's death, it's not easy to find the cause of death. In addition, typing it up on a computer and printing it off so that you can show others makes it seem a bit too carefully prepared. My guess is that you were planning to commit suicide from the beginning." Sakurako-san asks, "isn't that right?"

Fujioka-san stares at Sakurako-san for a moment, then silently nods.

"You were using the curse that causes your family to be short lived to make your suicide look accidental. Did you call out to Utsumi to make it seem like you didn't want to die? With a police officer nearby, it would make it seem more credible. You must have thought Utsumi is easily deceived, based on his personality." Sakurako-san looks in Utsumi-san's direction with a bitter smile.

"Why would you do such a stupid thing…" Utsumi-san can't say anything more than that.

His face turns red with anger and sadness, and he hits his fist against the stump. He clenches his jaw to stop his emotions from coming out. His tears fall on Fujioka-san's cheek.

"…I was scared." Fujioka-san opens his mouth and lets out a deep sigh. "When I first heard my daughter's heartbeat at the hospital, I became worried about dying. Until then, I didn't have anything I was scared to lose. For the first time, I was scared to die." He holds his head in his hands while he continues talking. "Even though I was inexperienced, I dealt with business investments. It was supposed to be a more careful, steady income than before. However, due to a scandal in the business world a number of months ago, several investments popped. Now the Northern Hokkaido economy is having an unprecedented crisis."

"Ah…"

The scandal caused a tremor in the Hokkaido economy. It was none other than the case we had been involved in before. A tragic incident where Sakurako-san ruined someone's revenge. I'm crushed by a feeling of guilt.

"…By the time I noticed, all I had was debt. It's an embarrassing story, but I didn't know how I'd survive the ends month, and felt trapped."

"No… Why didn't you say anything?!" The wife yells in surprise.

It seems like she had no idea. The baby groans, then starts to cry loudly. Fujioka-san

looks at the baby. I've never seen sad eyes filled with such love.

"It's strange. Until now, I've always woken up in the morning filled with anxiety, and wishing I hadn't woken up at all." Fujioka-san laughs at himself. "I thought that if I was going to die, I might as well do it myself. But if it was suicide, the life insurance would go down. So… I had no choice but to die of disease or an accident. Isn't it fitting for a cursed man to die from a broken axe?" Fujioka-san stifles a laugh.

It might be because he's bleeding so much, but his voice sound frail.

"…I'm sure Hector knew about my decision. He always watched me because he wanted to stop me. But I still decided to go through with it. Same with the picture. I'd just be an unfortunate man who died to the curse."

Eventually he smiles, and collapses on the stump after losing his strength. Utsumi-san hurries to support him with his shoulder. Fujioka-san's face is really pale. He still seems to be conscious, since he smiles.

"Fujioka, get it together!"

"I hadn't planned for the arsenic until now. That's why I called on Utsumi to choose the 'accidental event.' He trusts me, and even if it's a bit unnatural, everyone would believe it was an accident if a police officer was there."

"You… really did something stupid." The wife hugs her baby tight as she cries, then she collapses to her knees.

"My father didn't make a lot of money, and it put my mother through a lot of hardships. Since I didn't want to inconvenience my wife, I wanted to leave her with a lot of money. Even more when my child was born. This is the only way I could think of to support them." He mutters, as if he doesn't want to be a burden.

"…You mean you don't have much money?"

With that question, the wife can't handle it anymore and buries her face into the baby's stomach. She raises her muffled voice.

"I can't believe you think not having money is worse than losing you! Do you think I'm only with you for your money?! We can let go of the house and everything else if we don't have money. As long as you're with your family, isn't that good enough?!"

He lifts her head and speaks in a strong tone. Her face is bright red with explosive anger. Fujioka-san looks frustrated.

"But…"

"Ever since the beginning, I've dreamed of growing old with you."

The wife takes a deep breath and speaks clearly. Fujioka-san's lips tremble. Eventually, we can hear the sound of the ambulance sirens approaching.

"The ambulance is going to take too long to get here!"

Utsumi-san notices and stands up, then reaches out a hand to Fujioka-san. But he doesn't stand up. His breathing quickens, but he doesn't have enough strength to get off the stump.

"Fujioka, you idiot!" Utsumi-san yells out a battle cry as he picks up Fujioka-san on his back.

"U… Utsumi?"

"You're going to owe me for the rest of your life!"

Utsumi-san starts running with Fujioka-san, even though Fujioka-san is taller than him.

"This is your nest! Your wife and baby are here, what more do you need?!" The ambulance siren grows louder as it get near. Utsumi-san yells in a cheerful tone while he runs. "You're not a baby crow. Do you understand? It's a nice nest, you should live there properly. Why would you willingly fall from there?"

"Utsumi…"

Tears fall from Fujioka-san's eyes. He nods and buries his face into the back of Utsumi-san's head. Utsumi-san's cheeks are also covered in blood and tears. Just as Utsumi-san was worried about, the car parked in the road is making it hard for the ambulance to reach the house. Utsumi-san once again reaffirms himself as a diligent police officer. He runs straight to the ambulance with Fujioka-san still on his back. As soon as the paramedic notices, they rush to Fujioka-san.

"He'll be alright now." Sakurako-san mutters.

"Really?!" I ask. She nods, and the wife turns to look at us.

"Yes. Maybe not today, but someday for sure."

The wife hugs the baby, and laughs while she cries.

Final part

After Fujioka-san disposed of his family heirloom, he decided to have a fresh start. He moved into an apartment that I asked my mother to give him for cheap. It's quite comfortable. After a while, I got an email from the wife that saying, "I feel for comfortable here than in the other house. (*v v*)" She seems to have made some mom friends, since they have young children, too. They're going to the Asahiyama zoo next week. Fujioka-san's leg was somewhat damaged, but he stabilized with treatment, and got a job at an IT company.

My friend Kougami's father runs a western-style restaurant, so the wife works there twice a week. The Kougami family needed a new employee, and at this rate, the Fujioka family will repay their debt soon. They also sent their juicer to Sakurako-san's house as a present. Gran seems delighted that she gets to make fresh juice. However, they sent more than just the juicer to the Kujo family.

"…In the end, Hector Fujioka because Hector Kujo."

"There was no helping it. It'd be too cramped for him, living in that tiny apartment."

The weather is nice this Sunday afternoon, so I go with Sakurako-san and Hector to Kaguraoka Park. I can smell the delicious scent of someone grilling meat. I walk with Hector up a gentle slope with some ice cream I bought at a stand. The ice cream smells faintly of honey, and it tastes delicious.

"Gran didn't object to it."

"It wasn't as difficult as I would have thought."

"Hahaha."

The Fujiokas' cat was given to the wife's family, and Hector was given to the Kujo family. Hector likes Sakurako-san, but she only likes animal corpses. As Fujioka-san said, Hector is good at sniffing out dead bodies, which makes Sakurako-san happy. Because of this, Hector will

end up being involved in some difficult situations, but that's a different story.

"Now that you own him, isn't he cute?"

"He's extremely smart. Gran really likes him now, too. He's also a fine watchdog."

"Sakurako-san, isn't he cute?" I ask.

She thinks for a moment… Then she groans a bit, looks down at Hector, then says, "not really. Now would be a good time for a nap. It's nice and warm."

I think she thinks he's cute, deep down. While they're walking, Sakurako-san sometimes peeks down at Hector, and he looks up at her and smiles. She's already done her ice cream cone, and she looks at the wrapper with disappointment. She smiles when I hand her my half finished ice cream.

They say pets resemble their owners, but what if they met by chance? I look at Sakurako-san, who is walking Hector in her white dress. Their smiles really do look alike. We sit down on a bench, next to some small blue flowers that I don't know the name of. I get out a water bottle, and pour some into a cup for Hector to drink. The water droplets on his fluffy, white fur shine in the sunlight.

"…I want to thank you." Sakurako-san suddenly says.

"If it's about the ice cream, it's fine."

"It's not about the ice cream. It's about the man who owned him before."

"…What?" For a moment, I can't understand what she's saying. "Sorry. Why… now?"

"I wanted to thank you, so I said my thanks." Sakurako-san makes a face like she's saying "don't make me repeat myself", then takes a deep breath. "…At the time, I didn't doubt that he chose Utsumi, but I couldn't find his real intention."

"Ah, it's nothing, really…" I smile at being thanked.

"This isn't something to smile about." However, Sakurako-san raises her eyebrows and says to me in a strong tone, "If you weren't there, this man would be dead. A human's life is in danger if they lose one third to half of their blood. For the actual quantity, that would be around 2 litres. If it wasn't noticed soon, this man would be dead."

"But it's thanks to your deduction…" I say, but Sakurako-san slowly shakes her head.

"No, it was thanks to you, Shoutarou. It was your achievement."

-"Shoutarou"

That's the first time she has called me by my name. I'm shocked, happy, embarrassed, and I want to run. It's a great feeling.

"…Four centimetres." Sakurako-san says suddenly.

"What?"

"Your height. You've grown four centimetres since we first met."

Sakurako-san puts her hand on top of my head and slides it back and forth, as if to measure my height.

"You're wrong." I grin broadly. "It's 4.5cm. You've still got a long way to go, Sakurako-san."

"What?"

Sakurako-san pouts, surely thinking that it's only 0.5cm.

"I'm still growing" I say confidently.

I think I really will grow more. My joints have been hurting recently.

“Soon I’ll be able to see over your head, Sakurako-san.”

Right now I’m not even at eye level with her. By this time next year, I’m going to be looking down from slightly above her. Probably. Definitely.

“…Is that so?”

Sakurako-san grins at my words, bends down. I look down at her defiant expression. I’m sure I’ll grow another ten centimetres. I might not be as tall as Ariwara-san, but she can’t keep calling me “boy” forever.

“Alright, let’s run! Hector!”

They said on the TV that exercise is important to help you grow more. I grab Hector’s leash. Sakurako-san is surprised, but runs after us.

Grandma's Pudding

It always rains a lot in September. The rain comes in suddenly and heavily. The sun was peeking out this morning, so I decide to head to the Nagayama cemetery after school, but I soon notice signs of rain. I can hear the sound of thunder, and I can see the dark clouds approaching, so I have no choice but to take my bike. Instead of going home, I go to Sakurako-san's house since it's near the cemetery. Fortunately, the rain only catches up to me while I pass Daidou temple. Even if it's a passing rain, it's still hard, so by the time I get to the Kujo residence, there's water dripping from my forehead.

"Oh my, this is terrible, young master."

"Sorry this is sudden…"

Even though I showed up completely unannounced, gran seems to know at a glance that I'm here to take shelter from the rain. As she lightly jogs off to grab a towel, Hector comes running down the stairs, his nails clicking on the floor.

"Woah"

I try to put my sling bag on the floor in the entrance, but Hector puts his head under my arm.

"Hector, you're going to get wet."

He's only been at Sakurako-san's place for a few weeks. It seems like he's really gotten used to the house. He's become more lively and relaxed than he was when he lived with the Fujiokas. He has become really spoiled. When I look into his black eyes, I can't resist petting him. It's like magic.

"Here, Hector."

Gran comes back carrying several fluffy, high quality towels. She sees me petting Hector in the entrance, so she taps his back. Hector looks like he's saying "please pet me more." When I stop moving my hands, he pats me with his fore paws and wet nose, like he's saying "more, more." I give up and pet his head while gran dries me off with a waffle towel. When I was a child, my grandma would dry me off after a bath roughly and relentlessly, but still gently without causing me any pain. It seems somehow nostalgic, even if it was embarrassing.

"What's wrong? This is sudden." I hear Sakurako-san's voice and footsteps as she comes down the stairs.

"Sorry, it's the anniversary of my grandma's death so I went to visit her grave in Nagayama, but it started raining suddenly. I thought it would be easier to come here than to go home."

“Well, I didn’t end up making it,” I say as gran wipes my head.

This fancy towel is really absorbent. Gran releases me, and when I raise my head, Sakurako-san is standing in front of me.

“Gran, we should have some of Naoe’s clothes. Give him those.” Sakurako-san says after seeing that my shoulders are wet.

“I’ll be fine if I dry off soon.”

“I don’t want my room to get wet.”

“Ah, I see.”

I see, she wasn’t concerned about me.

I take off my slightly damp socks that are clinging to my feet, and go to the room next to the living room to change my clothes. The room smells a bit old, and doesn’t seem to be used for much more than storage. A covered piano, cardboard, old paintings, and more are stacked in the back of the room. Although I’m interested, I feel like I shouldn’t look at it too much, so I turn around and get changed quickly. Regardless of the shirt, the pants that were prepared for me are the perfect size at the waist, but they’re way too long…

“A… Ariwara-san…”

Even though I can’t help the fact that we’re different heights, I feel a little crushed that our legs are such different lengths. As I leave the room, Sakurako-san and gran burst out laughing at me.

“It’s okay, hem them.”

Gran laughs as she sews the hem on the pants. It breaks my heart. Hector is my only ally. I grant Hector’s request to throw a ball that he’s holding in his mouth. I do a quick feint throw before actually throwing the ball.

“Honestly, I was about to begin assembling bones. Then you got in the way.”

“I’ll leave as soon as the rain stops, so you can build it without worrying about me.”

“I can’t, I’ll get distracted.”

Sakurako-san wrinkles her eyebrows frustratedly, and asks gran to make tea.

“Young master, are you hungry?”

“Oh, I’m fine for today.” I answer the usual question. I suddenly remember that I left my bag in the entrance. “That’s right, I brought presents today. You’re more than welcome to have some.” I tell Sakurako-san as I head back to grab my slightly damp bag.

It’s good that it isn’t wet inside. Well, more or less… I put my book in my pocket, take out a noisy paper bag, then head back to the living room.

“It was on my back, so it might be a bit messy inside.”

As I place the bag on the living room table, I hear the sound of glass. Sakurako-san gets up to see what it is.

“Ta-da, pudding.”

I grin while I take out a bottle. Inside the small milk bottle is peach coloured pudding.

“It’s chick pudding. Plain custard, strawberry, cheese, chocolate, sesame, matcha, pumpkin… I brought all seven of the classic flavours.”

After the peach coloured one, I lay out a pink, white, and light brown bottle among other colours on the table. The pudding is popular in bakeries in Nankou. At first they only has the custard flavour, but as they became more popular, they slowly added more flavours. Now,

there's around 10 flavours. The bakeries are supposed to be the main business, but they're completely overshadowed now. They recently stopped selling the bagels I always liked.

"Go ahead, gran. Well, they were supposed to be offered to a grave."

"I see… Let me get something to go with it."

Gran thinks for a moment, nods, then goes into the kitchen to get tea. Sakurako-san's eyes shine when she looks at the bottles. I recommend the chocolate flavour to her, and take the basic custard flavour for myself. She takes the chocolate and the strawberry ones in each hand, and looks back and forth with concern. Her expression is very serious, and she wrinkles her eyebrows.

"I'll leave the rest, so you can have the other flavour later." I say with a smile. She finally chooses the chocolate one.

I give her a little plastic spoon I got from the store. Sakurako-san looks at the double layer of chocolate sauce and chocolate pudding before taking a bite.

"I hope you enjoy it."

Sakurako-san's face lights up as soon as she takes a bite. After seeing her delighted expression, I start eating my own pudding. The caramel part starts to bleed into the rest of the pudding when it's handled roughly, so I carefully start eating the custard part. The gentle scent of eggs and the moderate sweetness spread through my mouth. It melts as soon as it touches my tongue.

"Yeah, it's delicious."

I can't help but smile. I take a slightly deeper scoop this time, and pick up some caramel with it. Since I have a child's tastes, I don't like it when the caramel is too bitter. I also don't like it being too sweet. My point is that the balance between the sweetness and the bitterness is what makes this pudding delicious.

Sakurako-san and I focus on our pudding for a while in mutual silence. When gran comes back, she smiles at us, then takes the sesame flavoured pudding.

"It's delicious." Gran says after taking a bite.

I'm happy.

"By the way, I'm impressed that you're visiting your grandma's grave on the anniversary of her death."

"I sometimes forget to visit."

I'm shy about being praised by gran, but I shake my head. Even if it's only on the anniversary of her death, I have to go to her grave and clean it properly, otherwise she'll scold me in my dreams. It doesn't feel bad to be praised. I look to Sakurako-san. Bones are bones. That's how Sakurako-san thinks of the 'things' that have died, so she wouldn't visit something as meaningless as a grave. I was worried she's think it's stupid, but she seems more interested in her pudding than our conversation.

"I'm glad both of you liked it. My mom doesn't like pudding. Since my grandma always had this pudding with me, I brought it as an offering."

"Did your grandma like pudding?" Gran asks.

Sakurako-san finishes her pudding and immediately tries to grab another one, but gran smacks her hand away.

"Yes. Only this pudding. My grandpa used to be a chef at a hotel, so he often made

pudding as a snack, but I've never seen her eating it."

"…I thought this before, but your grandpa is really multitalented."

Sakurako-san pouts as she reluctantly drinks her black tea.

"Multitalented…?"

For a moment, I blink, not understanding what she means. I suddenly realize that this is a misunderstanding and shake my head.

"…Ah, that's not true. It's not someone multitalented. There were three people."

"Three people?"

"Yeah. There's my chef and jazz connoisseur grandpa, my fishing and mountain climbing hobby grandpa, and my judoist grandpa, so three people. Them, along with my older brother, are family from my father's previous marriage."

Gran and Sakurako-san exchange curious glances. I smile bitterly and answer right away. I guess they don't understand. It's really a simple thing, though. My grandparents are the parents of my older brother's birth mother.

"So young master's name is "Shoutarou" right? You mentioned your older brother, so I'm curious."

Gran nods like she finally understands.

"Well, that name was given to me by my great grandfather."

Tarou is usually only attached to the name of the oldest son. I heard there was a bit of a dispute trying to name me. Still, my mother loved my great grandfather, and wanted to give me his name. She wanted to keep the "ta" kanji, but it would have a bad seimeihandan, so she decided on "Shoutarou." (TL NOTE: seimeihandan is like fortune telling based on a person's name, it dictates their personality, success, etc.)

"For my brother's maternal grandparents, my brother is their only grandchild. They've always been partial him, so even though I'm here now, I can't replace him. I was also loved, and I'm actually pretty close with my grandpas."

My mother has always worked lots to support the household finances, so maybe that's why I'm so close to my grandparents. If my brother or I needed something, it was always my grandpa that came to help helped, not my mother.

"Although my grandparents I'm closest to are the ones on my mother's side."

In other words, that's the grandma I went to visit the grave of today. My grandma on my mom's side has always been special to me, it isn't comparable to my grandpas.

"And… My grandpa's pudding used to be my favourite food, but my grandma didn't like western-style food, so she had watery pudding. Then she was hospitalized for cancer… It was terminal. I would always go visit her in the hospital, and she always told me to bring this pudding." I say as I take my last bite, then cleanly scrape the leftover pudding off the uneven bottom.

I don't like sweets as much as Sakurako-san, but I still feel like eating another one. Still holding my spoon, I reach out to grab another one. I look up at gran to make sure it's okay. Gran sighs like she has no other choice, then nods to Sakurako-san and I. I reach to grab the strawberry one first, but when I sees her concern, I grab the cheese one instead.

"Well, my grandma would always eat about half of it, then I'd finish it. She probably picked this because it's soft and easy to eat."

“I guess so.”

“At that point, the cancer metastasized to her bones, and her body started to get worn out. Even when I visited, she’d get tired quickly. But it was still both my grandma’s decision and mine to keep visiting and having pudding together.” I say, then take a bite of my soft pudding.

It’s fluffy and slightly sour, and the blueberry sauce that’s sinking to the bottom is amazing. I remember Kougami saying this cheese flavour is her number one favourite when we had tea before. My grandma’s favourite was pumpkin. I think that’s the best flavour. That’s why, even though I picked it up first, I thought about giving it to Sakurako-san and gran. My grandma would always hog them.

“That’s why I brought this pudding as an offering today. Honestly, I like pudding that’s a little bit firmer, like the pudding my grandpa made.”

“This is certainly delicious, but I like gran’s pudding. It’s firm, too.” Sakurako-san says while she gleefully eats her second pudding.

The best puddings are the ones with a flavour that reminds you of your mom, or your home. My best friend, Imai, says that gelatine pudding is his favourite.

“Pudding tastes like “home,” kind of like fried eggs, doesn’t it?”

Maybe it’s because they’re both familiar foods. Pancakes and cookies are both simple sweets made at home, but pudding feels a bit distanced from them.

“Is it really okay that I brought it even though she didn’t particularly like this pudding? I had to take a detour from the way to the hospital to get to this store. ‘There are other stores on the way, so why not go there?’ When I asked, she said it had to be from there.”

After eating so much sweet food, I take a bite of the sour sauce and drink some of my tea to reset my tongue.

“Well, you often hear about illness changing someone’s tastes.” Sakurako-san says in a light tone while she admires her strawberry pudding.

I’ve heard of that, too, so I nod. Suddenly, gran stops eating and looks at me.

“What’s wrong?”

“…I think I can answer your question.”

“Huh?”

I’m surprised. I take a moment to process what she just said.

“My question… about the pudding?”

“Yes. I think I might know the reason for that ‘detour.’”

“…What?”

She puts her pudding on the table, drinks some of her tea, and puts her cheek in her hand as if she’s hesitating about saying it. When I say, “please tell me,” she quickly exhales.

“Please answer a few questions for me. Your house is in Nankou, right? Then the big hospital is either the medical school or Takeda hospital. You probably took your bike to the hospital, am I correct?”

“Yes, it was the medical school, and I did ride my bike. Money was tight, so I couldn’t go often if it costed money.”

“Then it must have taken you about 10-15 minutes to get there, right? When someone is in the hospital, they need to have examinations and have their physical health checked every day. I’m sure that before you visited, you had to call first, didn’t you?”

“Oh, yes. My mom said it would bother my grandma if I suddenly showed up.”

“Even on days you did visit, they had to be decided on in advance, right?”

“Yes.” When I answer her questions, gran nods.

“…There’s probably a reason for that.”

“What?”

Sakurako-san blinks as she puts her pudding down on the table.

“What you were talking about with gran… How long did it take you to get to the hospital?”

“How long? Why?”

“10 or 15 minutes isn’t enough time.”

It seems like Sakurako-san knows where gran is going with this. However, it still doesn’t make sense to me. I don’t know what 10 minutes isn’t enough time for, or how that’s related to the pudding.

“Enough time? Umm… I’m sorry, but I don’t understand.”

They both stare at me in silence, looking puzzled. Sakurako-san lets out a sigh. I glance at gran and she whispers “you really are foolish.”

“You said your grandma had terminal cancer, and it even metastasized.”

“That’s right.”

“Do you know what it means when it metastasizes to the bone? It means the inside of the bone gets destroyed – think about that. The pain is unbearable.”

“Huh?”

Suddenly, pain spreads through my chest like I’ve been punched. I’m at a loss for words.

“You’re a kindhearted child. I’m sure your grandma loved you a lot. You spoke about her like she was at peace. That’s why I noticed. Your grandma didn’t want you to see her suffering.”

“That…”

Gran seemed a little hesitant to say that.

“I’m sure… When the pain got too severe, she was given morphine, a strong painkiller, which made her very tired...”

About one month after she was hospitalized, she was given a strong pain reliever. A nurse at the hospital told me they knew she couldn’t be saved, and her hospital stay was to help ease the pain during the end stages of her life. Eventually, she was in a state where it wasn’t clear if she was even conscious.

“They don’t use morphine suddenly. It’s given gradually until the pain stops.”

“…”

Sakurako-san says flatly. I don’t look up, I just close my mouth tight.

“For your grandmother, Shoutarou-chan was her cute, little grandson. She knew that if you saw her in pain, it would make you sad. You grandmother wouldn’t want that, right? Young master is so kind.” Gran says. “So, you had to call ahead before you visited so she could quickly get a painkiller injection, probably an IV. It would be impossible for it to take effect right away, but 10-15 minutes was probably enough time.”

“Ah…”

“You couldn’t arrive right away, she needed to buy time. So, she picked the pudding young master loves, since it’s soft and easy to eat with her physical condition. That’s what your

grandmother thought when she picked that shop."

Gran says as she smooths the paper bag from the shop. That's where the address is written.

"She also decided on that shop because there's a lot of flavours for you to pick from. Did you always take a long time to decide what flavours you wanted? She always had you call first. It was to avoid you showing up abruptly."

"In other words… she was stalling? She didn't want me to see her in pain?"

Gran nods a bit.

"Th-then… my grandma didn't actually like that pudding…?"

Gran doesn't nod this time, she just stares at me.

"That's…"

"I think that your visits were really important for your grandmother. Your grandmother didn't want to give up that precious time with you because of her illness."

I put both my elbows on the table, and cover my face. I have a headache. My eyes feel hot warm.

"…Every day, she always talked with me like normal. About what happened that day like at school, or boring things, obvious things…" I mumble a groan.

That's right, when she was in the hospital, she always wanted to talk about silly things to pass the time.

Memories from when I was a kid pass through my mind. My grandma was always in the kitchen when I came home from elementary school. She'd ask, "what did you do at school today?" I'd tell her about my day, and she'd make me a snack if I was hungry. She'd smile while she cut up an apple. I miss those ordinary days.

"I never noticed…"

Time with her didn't feel like it changed, even if the location changed from the kitchen to the pure white hospital room. I'd sit on the bed next to her and talk about school, what I saw on TV, my mom and older brother, and other everyday stories. Those trivial things never changed.

"She… didn't have to force herself to do things like that."

"No, that's not it. That's what she wanted. She wanted to spend time with you like always."

"Still! If she'd told me… I could've done something! I could've brought something she liked better…"

I hit the table. I bump the pudding bottles, and they clink together. I'm angry at myself. While my grandma hid her pain, I took up her time, and never said anything important to her…

"It doesn't matter what you said. Visiting her was the best thing you could've done for her." Gran says, then she reaches out to put her hand on my head. "Besides, I think she knew how you felt."

She gently strokes my head. My eyes start to water.

"…I did something I shouldn't have. I revealed the secrets your grandmother tried so hard to keep."

I cover my face to try to stop my sobs from leaking out, but my shoulders start to shake, and I can't stop myself from crying.

"Your grandma really loved you." Gran says softly.

The two of them pretend not to look at my while I cry like a child. Hector restlessly paws at me, licks my hands, and tries his best to make me feel better. Eventually, my fit of sadness ends, and my kind feelings for my grandma fill my chest. Sakurako-san hands me a box of tissues. I take it with an embarrassed smile, and use the tissues to wipe my face and blow my nose.

“Gran, get him another cup of tea.” Sakurako-san says. Gran stands up, but Sakurako-san quickly grabs her wrist.

“…What’s wrong?”

“Be honest with me.” Sakurako-san says quietly.

Gran blinks in curiosity.

“Don’t try to deceive me. Tell me when you’re having a hard time. Don’t lie. Your pain is my pain.” Sakurako-san says, then sits down, giving gran a stern look.

Gran looks down at Sakurako-san, blinks, then smiles.

“I’m not.”

“Gran?!”

“I have my own pride. Even if you ask about some things, I won’t tell you.”

Sakurako-san starts to get up. Gran puffs out her chest and speaks clearly.

“What did you say?!”

“No matter what you say, I won’t.”

Gran laughs, pulls her hand away from Sakurako-san, then disappears into the kitchen.

“Gran…”

Sakurako-san looks shocked as she sits back down in her chair. I look at her and smile. She’s really strong.

“Young master! Young master!”

Suddenly, I can hear gran’s panicked voice from the kitchen. I chase after Hector, who immediately starts running. When Sakurako-san and I enter the kitchen, gran points out the window.

“It’s a rainbow, young master.”

It looks like the rain let up. Outside the window is a beautiful rainbow, clearly visible in the blue sky. It’s like a message from my grandma. Another tear slides down my cheek.

Third bone: Entrusted Bones

Part 1

Three days straight of rain washes away the remaining heat. After so long, seeing the blue sky is refreshing. It smells like autumn. It won't be much longer until the fruit on the Japanese Rowan trees turns blood red. After the rain, the streets get covered in the colours of fall. The street I walk along is no exception.

The red torii at the Nagayama shrine run along the path between the Nagayama library and Daidou temple. It's on the way to Sakurako-san's house.The deepening fall colours around this time give me a strange feeling, like I'm being left behind. I start feeling sentimental. I don't hate fall, so I wonder why it makes me feel gloomy? I feel a little lost and lonely.

Unlike usual, I don't feel like going to the Kujo residence today. It's the same feeling as the first time I visited this house. While I want to talk to Sakurako-san, I'm hoping from the bottom of my heart that she isn't home.

At the time, I thought she was a criminal, or at the very least a bad person. Of course, it's different now. She still committed a crime, though. I want to believe she's innocent.

I reflect on my lack of enthusiasm. The Kujo residence has the same, uninviting atmosphere as ever. As if scolding me for my conflicted feelings, the giant Nichiren statue at Myozenji temple looks down at me angrily.

"…" For a moment, I think about turning back, but I decide to continue walking past Nichiren's gaze.

"…Oh." As I approach the house, I notice the reason for my discomfort. "That's strange… It's closed." The aged wooden gate is usually open, but it's closed today. I try pushing on it, but as I expected, it's locked.

"Well… I guess gran isn't here, either."

I feel a bit lonely. A while ago, she said her knee wasn't doing very well, so maybe they took the car to go shopping, or maybe they went to the hospital… I wait for a while, until my heart feels like it's broken. It's not like I called ahead before visiting, anyway.

If Sakurako-san had a smartphone it might be a different story, but she doesn't like such means of communication. I once asked if it was inconvenient to need to carry around a phone book, but I was told "I never forgot a phone number after I've dialled it once." I thought there's no way, but maybe it is true. Her memory has always been amazing.

"…But now what should I do?"

It can't be helped, I'll just have to visit again another time. That's right, it can't be helped. The cake I brought will be wasted, so I'll just have to eat it myself. I tell myself that and turn around.

"It can't be helped, it can't be helped." I chant like I'm casting a spell. I start walking back toward Nagayama shrine. My legs feel heavy on my way home today. I wish I could take the bus instead of my bike. I let out a big sigh until my lungs are empty as I approach the red torii.

Part 2

Everything started about a month ago. It was the day of my school's cultural festival. The second day was open to the public.

"Hey, you're dressed surprisingly nicely today."

I greet and bow slightly to Hori-san, the school janitor who is waiting by the front gate. As of this year, Hori-san has been working here for 20 years consecutively, paying attention to every corner every day, and keeping the high school beautiful.

"Are you waiting for someone? A family member?"

"Not family but, yeah, something like that."

"Your lover?"

"No way! They're more like a friend… I guess?"

My mom isn't coming today. My older brother that lives in Tokyo is hospitalized with pneumonia. It seems he aggravated a summer cold, and my mom got worried and upset, so she decided to visit him for about a month. So that's why this year, I didn't plan to have anyone come to the cultural festival. I mentioned it to Sakurako-san while we were making small talk, I didn't really mean anything by it. To my surprise, she tilted her head and thought for a minute, then said "then I'll go." I was surprised and a bit embarrassed, but also a bit happy. It's weird when she does something for me, instead of just for bones.

"F-first of all, we don't have a special relationship or anything."

I try to hide my delight as I wave my hand at Hori-san.I always worry about how to answer when people ask me about Sakurako-san. Maybe the most accurate way to put it would be a "teacher and student relationship"? Though I don't particularly want to learn about bones and corpses. While we were talking, I notice that the decorations on the school gate got blown by the wind, so I fix the tape.

It was past the time we agreed to meet, but Sakurako-san still wasn't there. She's always loose when it comes to meeting times, but I started to worry about if she'd come at all. Just as I started to get worried, she finally showed up.

"You're late! I thought you weren't coming!"

"Really?"

"Geez, if you don't have a phone, you should at least carry around a watch."

Under the sun, Sakurako-san's white dress clearly stands out, even among the unique atmosphere of the cultural festival. With her nice posture and beautiful way of walking, I feel a bit superior for being with her.

“No, no, what kind of relationship do you have?” Hori-san pulls me aside and asks me. I guess that’s to be expected if we’re walking together, even if we’re not holding hands.

“We’re really just acquaintances.”

I’m sure it’s surprising (even if it isn’t said) to see me with a beautiful person like Sakurako-san. Honestly, I didn’t think we were quite so unbalanced today.

“Still, I didn’t expect you to be interested in a school cultural festival. My class this year is selling pancakes. What do you want to do? Want something to eat?”

Sakurako-san is covering one ear and scowling at me, since I’m talking louder than usual. She slowly opens her mouth to respond.

“…Why are you asking me that?”

“What?”

“Why did you ask when you knew what the answer would be?” Sakurako-san asks me. It seems like she finds this to be a bother. But she’s right. She has a sweet tooth, so I know she won’t turn down food if I ask her.

“That’s… That’s how a conversation works”

“I thought you’d know by now that I dislike unnecessary conversation.”

I was so happy that she said she’s come to the festival, but those words hit me with disappointment like a bucket of water.

“I-I do know that, but isn’t it fine for me to talk with you?”

“Is there any benefit in talking to me?” She shrugged her shoulders.

I didn’t want to give up and lose, but then footsteps started to approach us. I looked up in the direction of the footsteps and saw a hazy white figure stretch both hands toward us.

“What?!”

I looked carefully and notice that it was a girl wearing a white kimono. She had long hair drooped over her face all the way down to her waist, and red paint made to look like like blood. It was scary at a glance.

“Kujo-san!”

“…Ko-Kougami?!”

The person who tackled Sakurako-san was a girl from another class, Yuriko Kougami. I shouted in surprise. She lifted her long bangs, smiled, and bowed.

“Wow, I didn’t recognize you at first…”

She was dressed as a stereotypical “ghost” wearing a white yukata. Her long, dark hair is perfect for her costume. Her yukata was put on backwards, but I didn’t understand at first.

“A ghost with her head twisted backwards is a nice idea.”

I tightened the black band around her stomach like she told me to. Since the back part of the yukata was on the front, it was apparently tight on her neck. There also wasn’t much extra space above the band on her stomach, so it was tight on her chest. Kougami… Has a nicer figure than I thought.

“It… It suits you.” I said, unintentionally looking away.

“Doesn’t it? When my class decided to do a haunted house, I was unanimously voted into this role.” Kougami looked proud. My face starts to feel warm. I hoped my face wasn’t noticeably red.

“…It’s good that you’re so lively,” Sakurako-san said suddenly.

Kougami has an enthusiastic glow. She seemed to really like Sakurako-san after her involvement in solving the incident with her grandmother. Kougami laughed while pushing her bangs with both hands. Somehow, watching them made me feel irritated. I don't really understand who I'm irritated at, or why.

"Yuri! Reception desk!" A girl called out to Kougami from behind us. Kougami quickly replied with, "I'll be right there!"

"Kujo-san, could you come to my class later?" She said a bit shyly as she covered her face with her long bangs again.

I noticed the white piece of rubber that would normally be on her forehead is on the back of her head. She smiled and said, "that looks good on you, Tatewaki-kun."

"Really?"

"Yeah. Next to Sakurako-san, you look like her butler."

That's right. I borrowed black formal clothes from Ariwara-san, got white gloves and some elegant glasses to create a butler look. My class was doing a maid café. My school was originally an all-girls school, but later became coed, so there aren't as many boys. It was originally only going to be the girls cosplaying, but then we decided that the boys can dress up as butlers.

"The whole servant look seems natural on you, it looks good."

"…Wait a minute, was that a compliment?"

It looks good! I yelled, "Kougami!" She smiled and waves to me, then turned around and went back to her class.

Looking at our clothes and the way we were facing, it looked like a horror movie being played in reverse. She had a mask of a character from an anime for young girls on the back of her head. Even though it's normally a cute character, the hollow eyes made it seems eerie and creepy.

"Honestly, Kougami…" I mumbled quietly. Even if she didn't mean to , she really lightened the air.

"My class is this way." I grabbed Sakurako-san's hand and took her to my classroom, waving at the ghost who was sitting at the reception desk for the haunted house on my way. My class was right next to Kougami's. Sakurako-san didn't grab my hand, but she didn't pull her's away, either.

"Welcome back, milady!!"

As soon as we entered the classroom, all the girls dressed as maid, and the boys dressed at butlers, simultaneously welcomed Sakurako-san. She looked surprised for a moment. I smiled and let go of her hand, then took her to the best seat, right next to the window.

"Please wait a moment, milady. It'll be prepared soon." I hit my hand against my chest and bowed. She seemed confused, but nodded.

Sakurako-san is knowledgeable, but I don't think she knows much about maid cafes. There is a maid café in Asahikawa. I don't think Sakurako-san has ever been there, and neither have I. After all, it didn't look like she was familiar with this atmosphere at all. She watched as girl in my class, wearing a frilly skirt, drew a heart with chocolate sauce on a customer's pancakes.

Sakurako-san is a real lady. She's always had gran taking care of her like a servant, so I

thought this place would suit her at first. Apparently it was a big misunderstanding on my part. Now that I think about it, she doesn't like people very much in the first place.

"I'll have an extra large portion of the fresh cream and chocolate."

I saw Sakurako-san's helpless expression. I softly whispered to her that I was sorry for bringing her here. Sakurako-san gave a bitter smile and nodded. She looked out at the sports grounds like she wanted to run away from the noisy classroom. I walked through the curtains into the simple kitchen, and served her a pancake on a paper plate, topped with plenty of fresh cream, chocolate sauce, with a glass orange juice. Sakurako-san looked down at the plate, smiled, and started eating the pancakes. I actually thought they didn't taste that good, but Sakurako-san didn't seem displeased, which made me feel a little relieved.

My class' maid café was pretty successful, but I was concerned about Sakurako-san, who had gathered the attention of the other customers and waiters. My close friend, Imai, was talking about Sakurako-san in the kitchen. It was vague enough that she didn't notice, and it made me feel a little good. At first it was embarrassing to serve customers while cosplaying, but it started to become fun after I got used to it.

"Tatewaki-kun, I'll have this."

"Ah, okay…"

When I turned back to the seating area with the pancakes I was handed, I noticed that Sakurako-san wasn't in her seat anymore.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, just Sakurako-san- I was wondering about my guest."

"Ah, that pretty woman? She left the classroom a while ago."

"Huh?"

Maybe she got mad and went home? I hurried out of the class and over to where Kougami was.

"No, she hasn't come here." Her black hair sways from side to side while she listens from behind the reception desk. It was probably true, I didn't think Sakurako-san would go to a haunted house.

"…She couldn't have."

Could it really be what I thought? While worrying, I suddenly thought of a place she could be. I run down the hallway, and down three flights of stairs while pushing past people and listening to the disturbing sounds of the threads in my suit breaking.

"Ah…"

Fortunately, my prediction is right on the mark. It's more like she wouldn't have gone anywhere except here.

"Honestly… this person" I sighed while standing in the entrance of the classroom.

This is the science room. It was the storage room for all the supplies for each class, cluttered with cardboard and scraps of paper. It seemed to be unlocked. Sakurako-san was in the science room.

"Hey." I took a deep breath and walked into the room. I started scolding her while she looked at the specimens in the glass case enthusiastically with her back turned to me.

"…What?"

"This place is for authorized personnel only."

“I’m looking at the specimens.”

“I know that.”

Sakurako-san spoke like she didn’t think she did anything wrong. The science room wasn’t open to the public that day.

“Is this all there is?” Sakurako-san asked in a displeased tone, ignoring my warning.

“Well… Aren’t there quite a few?”

She pouted a little at my reply, and looked more and more displeased. It was the science room, not a museum. I don’t know how many specimens are usually in a high school science classroom, but I know that there’s more here than in my middle school and elementary school.

“Since this is all there is, I’ll give you 10 minutes. This isn’t your house, Sakurako-san.”

Skeletons of a rabbit, a rat, and a sparrow, insect specimens, transparent fish specimens… I gestured at various displays. Sakurako-san looked disappointed, though.

“We should leave soon. The teacher will be angry if he sees us.”

Sakurako-san looked obviously defiant.

“…Then just a little longer. I’ll give you five extra minutes, if you really have to look.”

I know very well that Sakurako-san loves bones. It felt pointless to try to pull her away with the way she was, so I spread out my fingers to show five. However, Sakurako-san still looked dissatisfied.

“…Then ten minutes. That should be enough. Exactly ten minutes. I’ll set a timer.”

There was nothing I could do about it. I clearly explained the compromise I made up, and set the timer on my phone.

“Honestly, everyone is going to mad at me when I go back to class.”

Ignoring my grumbling, Sakurako-san happily reached for the rabbit specimen on the shelf.

“Don’t touch them.”

“But this method of display can’t fully capture the beauty of the rabbit’s bones.”

“That’s no reason!”

She ignored my warning and touched the rabbit skeleton. She blew the dust off, and adjusted the tiny foot bones and spine.

“Hey, just look. Not matter what, it’ll always be a rabbit.”

“…”

She immediately started readjusting all the rabbit bones. She was right, however. As she started adjusting it, it began to look more like a rabbit. I didn’t think adjusting the bones a bit would make such a difference.

“…I do think this looks better, but you still aren’t allowed to touch it. You should stop.”

“I know, I won’t touch it anymore.”

She finally relaxed her shoulders, then started looking around at the other specimens. I kept an eye on Sakurako-san while I checked the timer on my phone, then leaned against the wall.

“Ch…”

I suddenly heard a terrible sound from behind me, and quickly turned around. I noticed a poster of a whole human skeleton. The sound was the corner tearing away from the thumbtack when I leaned against it.

“I’m sorry,” I thought to myself and I push the thumbtack into the unripped part. Humerus, radius, ulna, carpal, metacarpal… I look at the names of the bones in the arm, then suddenly remember something.

“Ulna?”

U-l-n-a, ulna. Where have I seen that word before? I wonder where I’ve heard that before… I’m sure I saw it somewhere in Sakurako-san’s house. Suddenly, the door slammed open.

“Hey.”

“I-Isozaki-sensei?!”

My home room teacher, Isozaki-sensei, was standing in the doorway, holding a pamphlet for the festival. He teaches biology. He’s 31 years old and single. He’s nicknamed “the prince.”

“Y-you scared me.”

“You’re the one who surprised me. You’re not allowed to be here, didn’t you see the sign on the door?”

“Well, I know, but…” I mumbled. He sighed and said, “come on, I’m going to get angry.”

There is the reason why he’s called a prince. He’s tall and thin, but surprisingly muscular. He has nice facial features and almond shaped eyes, which seem to attract the women of the PTA. He’s fashionable, has dark hair, and he’s handsome. He hasn’t gotten married yet because, quite frankly, he’s too self centred. He even puts himself before his students.

He always lazily says, “I’m tired, I want to go home,” in class, and he was absent from the sports festival because he didn’t want to get sunburned. There’s rumours that he goes to a men’s beauty salon.

“I’m sorry, we’ll leave right away.”

I quickly grabbed Sakurako-san by the hand and started leading her out of the science room. However, Isozaki-sensei stands in our way.

“…Who is this?” He said, looking at Sakurako-san. “I see. I thought you weren’t interested in any of the girls in class, but maybe you just like older women. Or do you maybe only care about her looks?”

“You’re wrong, she’s just an acquaintance. Her name is Sakurako Kujo-san.”

“So there’s nothing inappropriate going on?”

Sakurako-san is definitely beautiful. She looks like a neat and proper lady, especially in her white dress today. A beautiful person and I alone in a classroom… He has every right to be suspicious.

“Inappropriate?! She has a fiancé.”

“A fiancé, huh?”

“Yes, so it’s not like that at all.”

“Hmm. I wouldn’t rule anything out just because she has a fiancé. Can’t you still be in love?” He said mysteriously.

“Huh?!” I was surprised, since I haven’t heard him talk like that before.

“Well, I can’t see you having such a troublesome partner.” Suddenly, he started laughing loudly. It made me feel a bit sick.

“I won’t deny it… Sakurako-san is pretty, but she’s also not what you’d expect.” I said, looking over at her. She seemed to have no interest in our conversation, and instead grabbed a

rat skeleton.

“Hey, Sakurako-san! You promised not to touch anything!”

“…Be quiet!” Sakurako-san suddenly raised her voice. I was surprised. Her expression is scary and stern.

“The bones are pathetic like this. Why do you think they’ve been stripped of their flesh? It’s to let us ‘learn.’ They’re telling us how the animal’s body moves and how they support it. It’s definitely not so they can collect dust in the corner of a room like this!”

I was really surprised. She was definitely angry. She was furious over the specimens that decorate the science room. Her normally white cheeks were dyed red, and her eyebrows were sharply angled.

”S… Sakurako-san?”

“It’s true, these are all wonderful specimens. The people who put these together made a big mistake leaving them here! This is an insult to the people who made these specimens! Do you understand?!”

I think I was more surprised than Isozaki-sensei. I stared blankly.

“Umm… Sakurako-san assembles specimens. Skeletal specimens, to be exact…”

“Assembles… specimens?” The teacher mumbled. Suddenly, he grabbed the sides of my head.

“Huh?”

“You should have said so. I would’ve handled this better!”

He apologizes to Sakurako-san, and forces me to bow my head as well. Honestly, I don’t know why I should have to apologize for her. But the teacher didn’t let me lift my head for a while.

“…You don’t need to apologize. I want to improve them. Bones aren’t just decorations.” Sakurako-san said as I tried to raise my head. He still didn’t let go.

“Kujo-san, did you say? Umm, I’m sorry, but I have a favour to ask…”

“A favour?” Sakurako-san asked. My back and neck started to get sore.

“I’d like you to help me organize something.”

“Organize?” Sakurako-san asked.

“Actually, the teacher who used to be in charge of biology suddenly died. He was in charge of the science room for a long time, and often put together skeletal specimens in the reference room. To be honest, it has been left unattended to for a long time.” The teacher said, bowing slightly. He finally released my head and looked towards the reference room door.

“Is it because of his ghost…?” I muttered. The teacher nodded.

“Of course, there isn’t really a ghost. I guess since it’s full of bones, people made up stories.”

The ghost of the science prep room is one of the seven mysteries of the school. From the back of the prep room, you can hear a man mumbling in the night, or a woman crying.

“The principal keeps pestering me to take care of it, but it’s too much for one person do handle alone! So if you can, I’d appreciate your help organizing them. Since they’re valuable specimens, I’d like to put them in the classroom so students can look at them.” He looked at the specimens in a glass case with a bitter expression.

“I… don’t have any money to reward you with, but I can buy you some food if you’d like.”

He bowed again and glanced up at Sakurako-san. After a moment, she said, “alright.”

“Really?!” His face lit up as he lifted his head suddenly.

“But if I do, the food has to be cake. Cake from the same place he got it from before.”

“Ah, from Dandelion?”

Come to think of it, last time my mom told me to bring a gift when I visited her house since she always has food for me there, so I brought some cake from a delicious cake shop that’s near my house.

“The pumpkin Mont Blanc… it tasted wonderful. I want three of them. Keep it a secret from gran, of course.” Sakurako-san muttered ecstatically.

The pumpkin Mont Blanc was certainly delicious. In one big mouthful you can get the crispy, buttery pie, the moist sponge cake, and the soft, sweet pumpkin cream. They’re also a convenient, easy-to-eat size. Even if you bite into all of it at once, you can still taste the three flavours separately. Best of all, the pumpkin is delicious. Even if I’m not as obsessed as Sakurako-san, they’re still the kind of cake I could eat at least two of.

“But Sakurako-san. If you want to keep it a secret, you absolutely have to finish your dinner.”

“No problem. I don’t mind as long as I can eat those again. Listening to gran yell at me for hours is a small price to pay.”

“Honestly…” I smiled bitterly, wondering if I should scold her, then turned back to the teacher.

“Is that okay, Isozaki-sensei?”

“That’s fine. The cake from there is delicious, the strawberry tart is my favourite. The cream brûlée, too. I love poking it with the spoon.”

Since my teacher also had a sweet tooth, he nodded, then told me to go pick it up. Even if he gave me the money, I don’t want to go myself.

“That’s good.” Sakurako-san turned around, and nodded with a bright smile. Since Sakurako-san loves both bones and eating delicious cake, she’s happy for sure.

“I’ll help, then.”

I can’t leave Sakurako-san alone with my teacher. Besides, I want to see the amazing reference room, anyway. However, if I could’ve gone back, I wouldn’t have accepted his request. I shouldn’t have let Sakurako-san go into the science room. There’s always a corpse waiting for her.

Part 3

On the Saturday after the cultural festival, I was in the science room with Sakurako-san and Isozaki-sensei.

“Still… This is amazing.”

“Isn’t it? It’s hard to imagine one person doing all this.” Isozaki-sensei sighed.

The room was so chaotic that I could imagine that teachers for generations have pretended not to see this mess. The room wasn’t just messy, it was dusty and dirty, too. Isozaki-sensei put on a mask and white apron. That getup doesn’t really suit his appearance.

“Wow, it’s falling apart…”

The teachers really overdid it. Reference rooms are usually the size of 6 tatami mats and are used for storing teaching materials, but this room was easily the size of 10 mats. The desk and chair were buried under piles of boxes and books. If we made one wrong move, it would probably cause an avalanche.

“Still, as Kujo-san said, these specimens were made to teach about the circle of life. Even if it’s just something small, you still have to respect them, right?” The teacher said, looking into a small, wooden box. There were bones from some winged creature resting on cotton inside. I think it was a small bird.

“Well… We’ll have to be careful with these.” He firmly nodded to show his determination.

He likes delicate animals. He wants to keep them safe. So he probably likes his students, too. Even if he says he hates taking care of them. We aren’t childish enough to obediently follow adults. Always emphasizing things “for the students’ sake!” doesn’t really resonate with us. In regards to that, he is always honest about what he likes and doesn’t like, and he’s always full of complaints. That’s why we get along with him. My class is close, but it’s all because our teacher is Isozaki-sensei.

“It’s a pain, but I’ll have to put in some effort. I’ll be punished if this keeps up.”

“That’s right. I’m sure it’ll be fine with the three of us.”

I felt like I should pay my respects to the bones. Feelings like that might be pretty Japanese, since “death” is considered something special. Personifying skeletal specimens like that. I felt like I’d meet divine punishment if I handled them carelessly.

“Where should we start?” I said, trying to find an easy way to start. I turned towards my teacher. I wanted to start by tidying things up, but I didn’t know exactly where to start.

“A list.”

“Huh?”

“We should take the bones out and make a list of them. If you take them out, I’ll check them. Depending on their condition, they might need to be fixed. I’ll make an order for them based on their value, and state of repairs. How’s that? Depending on the specimen, it might be better used for teaching. It would be better to pick those out by hand.” Sakurako-san said quickly. She started setting up her notebook computer. She also brought out some soft brushes to clean off dirt among other tools in a big bag.

“That would be great.” Isozaki-sensei nodded lightly.

“Then let’s get started.” Sakurako-san smiled as she snapped her gloves against her wrists.

I suddenly got a bad feeling when I heard that sound. I got a chill up my spine. I decided to ignore that feeling, since I’ve probably been conditioned like Pavlov’s dog, but that feeling didn’t wear off.

It was too hard to reach the back, so we started working from the front. Our first goal was to be able to open the steel cabinet. There were still a lot of boxes in front of it. We gave all the specimens to Sakurako-san. First, we had to sort the contents of the boxes.

I opened up a 30cm wide, wooden box. There were 3 bones inside. Isozaki-sensei started taking the bones out first. He seemed like he’d work on assembling them later. Even though the bones were scattered, each block was divided into transparent bags, so it was easy

to understand.

"Still, it's amazing, isn't it? Did one teacher really make all of this?" I asked Isozaki-sensei while I opened another box and looked inside.

"Seems like it. His name was Sasaki-sensei, but I've only heard stories and seen pictures of him. It sounds like he was a strange person, and wasn't very social."

"Huh…" That reminds me of someone I know.

"Every day, he'd just sit in the science room and make specimens except for when he was teaching. Sometimes you wouldn't see him for a while if he was picking up an animal carcass outside."

"…Oh."

I unintentionally laughed a bit. They sound exactly the same. I wonder if everyone who collects bones is like that? I smiled.

"One time, he brought a rotten animal into the school, and the stench lingered in the hallway for quite a while. That teacher also loved animals, but the dead ones…"

"I guess wild animals would bring in fleas and other insects."

That probably wasn't something to laugh about, but I couldn't hold it in and ended up laughing anyway. That really, really sounds like Sakurako-san.

"He has preserved insects, too."

I guess the biggest difference between Sakurako-san and that teacher is that the teacher collects things other than bones. Everything besides skeletons, like insects and tree nuts, were locked in glass cases. Unlike Sakurako-san, Sasaki-sensei probably collected these things because he was a teacher.

I carried some skeletons to where Sakurako-san was. I asked her if she was okay with doing this on her own, and she surprisingly nodded. Still, thinking about it, I guess she must be pretty knowledgeable.

Fortunately, Isozaki-sensei is familiar with plants. He sorted the plant specimens. He loved flowers, and he decorated his classroom with flowers every morning. After about 2 hours, we finally got to the cabinet. As I expected, the cabinet was also full of specimens.

"There we… go."

I carefully took a box out, and brought it back to the science room where Sakurako-san was. It was a bit heavy, so it slammed down on the table. "Treat them carefully!"she yelled at me.

"Sorry, it was pretty heavy. What kind of bones are these?"

"Probably sheep. There aren't any horns, so it was probably female."

"Sheep… in here?"

That must be the reason it's so heavy. She looked down at the bones I brought.

"These are… from a dog. Let me see."

"Hmm…"

While I brought in another box, I felt my chest tighten a little, and had an unpleasant feeling.

"Is something wrong?"

"No, it's just it gives me a complicated feeling when I think about the bones of pets."

I love dogs. Although I don't have one myself right now, I'd started playing with Hector

recently. Since I'm close with a living animal of the species, it made me feel reluctant to see the bones… or maybe what I felt was more like disgust.

"Why? It's the same as livestock. The only difference is if you eat them." Sakurako-san blinked curiously at me.

"There's a big difference." I smiled bitterly.

"Pet bones are different. People have memories of the time they enjoyed with their pets. Even you have Hector now, Sakurako-san. Besides, you used to have a cat, didn't you?" I definitely remember her saying that before.

Suddenly, I remembered. The word "ulna" on the poster. That's the skeletal specimen of a cat in Sakurako-san's living room. The word "Ulna" was written in parentheses next to the scientific name for cats on white tape.

"…Isn't it the cat skeleton in your living room?" I fearfully asked her.

"That's right. Ulna was my pet cat." She didn't seem to notice my discomfort, and nodded.

"Y…"

"What?"

"You made a skeletal specimen of your own pet cat?!"

"Who would it have been if it wasn't me?"

"You…"

The shock is like a blow to the head. It's not like she killed it. Sakurako-san would never do something like that. Until now I've been used to her cutting up animal remains with a knife, simmering them in a pot, bleaching them, and assembling them with resin… Not that I would do that kind of thing personally.

"…"

I was at a loss for words. Of course, I don't hate Sakurako-san. I respect her. She a bit troublesome, but she isn't a bad person. Still, making a skeletal specimen out of a pet cat is cruel and insensitive. Along with my disgust, I almost felt like I despised her at that moment.

"I didn't know why it died, but it was an abnormal death. That's why I wanted to find out."

I wonder if she noticed how I felt a bit. She shrugged her shoulders while she told me her excuse.

"To find out…"

"It was already dead. I performed an autopsy to find out what happened." Sakurako-san spoke in a unconcerned tone of voice. I got dizzy when I heard that.

"Before I made the skeletal specimen, I did an autopsy. In Ulna's case, I was investigating the cause of death. That was the first skeleton I finished making. Up to that point, I had only done chicken and pig legs. I had occasionally picked up dead animals like weasels and tried to assemble them, but I lacked experience."

Still, I can't accept a specimen of a pet cat.

"…Wasn't it painful?"

"What do you mean?"

"You loved your cat, then you dissected it."

I start to feel a bit emotional, and my eyes start to feel hot. Sakurako-san listened to me silently, then quickly exhaled.

“I was sad when it died. I suffered a lot.”

“…Is that it?”

“Is there anything else you want to ask? She thought for a moment.

“Do you remember the time before you made the specimen? The way it felt on your hand… Or when you pet its head…”

She didn’t seem like she wanted to answer my question directly. She tilted her head to the side, and instead of answering, she pointed to the fist-sized skull.

“What kind of animal is that?”

“A cat.” Sakurako-san answered quickly.

My throat felt tight. I regretted asking that. I started to get irritated.

“…I’ll go get the next one.”

I didn’t want to talk to her anymore. That conversation wasn’t working out. Her values and mine are too different. She knew that I was disappointed in her again. Every time I thought I was getting close to her, a big wall like this would pop up. One I’ll never be able to cross. I left Sakurako-san and went back to the reference room.

I looked down, but my vision was blurry. I tried to blink it away, but my cheeks started to feel hot, and my nose got runny. I tried to blame it on the dust in the room. Still, the fact that I didn’t want to talk to Sakurako-san made it easier for me to focus on cleaning.

Ignoring Isozaki-sensei’s attempts to take breaks, I silently brought specimens to the science room, and stored documents in the cabinets. There were four cabinets total. I put all my effort into cleaning up. Just past noon, the teacher was grumbling, “let’s take a break for lunch~” as I was starting to work on the fourth cabinet.

“Just endure it for a little longer. Let’s at least finish this shelf.”

I pretended not to notice my teacher glaring at me. I just wanted to get to a good stopping point. The last cabinet was next to the desk, so it was messier than the others. I started to think taking a break to eat might be a good idea, since I was getting sick of working. I thought it might help me concentrate.

“Let’s take a break, Isozaki-sensei.”

“There’s still this.” The teacher sighed and handed me a cardboard box he dragged out.

“Hm…?” It was lighter than the others, but the weight felt different. “…What is this?” When I opened it, there weren’t bones inside.

“Books…?”

It was a box filled with lots of different things. There was paper, letters, and books among other things lying in a heap. The books weren’t regular paperbacks. There were poetry anthologies from the Asahikawa Poetry Association, and books with abnormal bookbindings. Particularly Naduki’s poem “unscented flower” seemed like it was damaged while it was being put in the box.

“Isozaki-sensei, this box doesn’t have bones in it. What should I do?”

“Let me see.”

I called for the teacher, since my arms could barely hold it anymore. He looked into the box, raised his eyebrows, then put both his hands in it.

“Poetry, books, and this… Looks like a letter.”

He took out several tan coloured paperback books, and rustled through the papers.

Then, a coloured photograph fell out of a book. It was apparently folded in half and stuck between the pages. I picked it up, and saw it was a picture of two young women. They looked similar, so they might have been sisters.

"Thoughts of mistletoe pile upon my corpse, disemboweled, the mizubashou blooms…?" (TL NOTE: mizubashou is Asian skunk cabbage, but the Japanese name sounds a lot more poetic than the English one, so I left it as-is.) I turned the picture over, and read the letter on the back.

"That's a nice tanka. Did Sasaki-sensei write this?"

I didn't really understand what it meant. Things like disembowelment and corpses are unusual. The handwriting doesn't match the content.

"This… doesn't look like his writing." Isozaki-sensei looked over the letter and the picture, then picked up a postcard from the box.

"Here. This looks like the same writing."

"Oh, you're right. It does."

The postcard only had the name of the sender, Natsuko, and the words "are you doing well?" on it. It certainly looks like the same writing as the picture. Particularly the line in the "p." What does that letter mean to that teacher? I wanted to look more, but it felt like the items inside of the box were too personal. Looking inside without permission just felt wrong. Isozaki-sensei was thinking the same thing. He put the postcard back and closed the lid of the box.

"Hey, what's this?"

I picked up a paperback book that the teacher forgot to put in the box. It was sun bleached, old, and had no cover. The title was hard to read, but said "Mistletoe by Roka Takutomi"

"It's definitely "Roka." I don't know much about him, but he wrote a story that was set in Asahikawa – that's right. Did you see the panel when you went to the Hokuchin memorial museum during the last field trip?"

"Was the Hokuchin memorial museum the place with the JSDF exhibit? I missed going because I has a cold."

It seems that there was a panel about authors with a connection to Asahikawa. Unfortunately, I missed the lesson because of my cold, though. The Hokuchin memorial museum is facing the shrine honouring fallen soldiers that's just outside of the Sutaruhin ballparks, so I've seen it when I went to a Fighters' game with my grandpa. That's about it, though. It's far away from my house, and I haven't seen inside.

"That's right, that's right. Everyone was laughing at you because you couldn't sleep the night before a field trip."

"I'm not an elementary schooler. I just had a summer cold."

I always thought that the memorial museum was only about the history of the SDF, since Asahikawa used to be a military capital.

"I've never read one of the author's books. He uses real people as models for tragic love stories. I don't really care about other people's love, or their integrity."

"Well, I don't really like them either, but…"

When I turned the pages, there were only very old works, and sentences that were difficult to read. It's not that I particularly hate romance novels, but it's not a genre I usually read. Although I'm interested, the style of pretending that a blighted love is ideal, weakens my

interest.

"Are you a fan of this author?"

"Well, let's pass this on to his family, since it's a personal belonging. I think it's something they'll cherish."

"Yeah."

On the back of the book, "In Shunkoudai" was scribbled out. I thought "if it's an important book, you shouldn't write on it" while I put "Mistletoe" back in the box. It's not easy to open the box to put the book back, so I move out of the way before it gets stepped on.

"…Want to have lunch now?" The teacher said after taking a breath.

"Sure."

It seems I'd exhausted my concentration by trying to open the cardboard box. I let out a sigh and went to the science room where Sakurako-san was. Sakurako-san was so focused on making her list that we had to wait for her for 10 minutes. Our lunch was a bento made specially by gran.

People from other places tend to think zangi is only chicken. But in Hokkaido, there's a few types of it. Octopus zangi, along with ramen salad, are standard on the menu of most family restaurants. Though, for families, it's more common to see jingisukan zangi or salmon zangi. Basically, it's just deep fried food. But it's still delicious.

My bento had jingisukan zangi in it. It's easy to prepare, so my mother sometimes makes it. Since it doesn't make much preparation or oil to fry it, we have this type of zangi in my family more than chicken. Since it was sliced thinner than chicken, the jingisukan zangi absorbed the flavour wonderfully. Along with the unique, slightly burnt scent, there was also the scent of mutton. The scent alone was irresistible.

Of course, the crunchy fried fish is the best part, even if it's gotten a little soggy from the oil seeping out. I took a big bite of zangi first, then took a bite of a rice ball right after. It tasted amazing. The rice balls had a perfect amount of salt, and fell apart in my mouth. I kept alternating between zangi, rice ball, zangi, rice ball… I got stuck in a loop. Rather, I wish it could've gone on forever. Isozaki-sensei kept commenting on how delicious it was.

Sakurako-san put down her chopsticks and returned to working on her list. I asked her, "are you sure you're done eating?"

I thought that she was probably saving room to eat cake later. If I said anything to gran, she'd probably be angry.

"How's it going?"

Since it wasn't easy to stop, I peeked at the display Sakurako-san was working on with my fourth rice ball in one hand. After I already spoke to her, I remembered that I got angry at her earlier, but it was too late.

"Honestly, in a word, it's wonderful."

I was expecting her to tell me about her progress, but she didn't seem to understand. She squinted at her screen, and wiggled the cursor around to show me the specimens.

"You must be proud to go to this school." She said gently. Her white cheeks were dyed red with excitement.

"I am."

Honestly, this person… I'm amazed at how her smile can make all my anger disappear. I

wanted to relax a bit after eating, but since Sakurako-san was working so hard on making the list, I figured I couldn't just slack off. Isozaki-sensei and I had some tea after our meal, then got back to work.

The fourth cabinet was a really tough opponent. That's where I'd been putting most of the documents and such that I found lying around while cleaning up the bookshelves and under the desk. Finally, at around 4pm, most of the clutter was cleaned up. As I crouched to pick something up, I noticed a large, wooden box next to me.

"That's pretty big."

It was a box from on top of the third cabinet. It was big and placed up high, so I was trying to avoid taking it down. Still, I'll have to clean it up eventually. I tried to open the box, but it seemed to be locked.

"Huh?"

There was an old fashioned padlock on it that made a stiff clunk when I tried to open it. Unlike the other boxes, this chest was very old and heavy, and had a mark like a family crest carved into the front. If there's no key, I couldn't see any way of opening it besides breaking it.

"Isozaki-sensei… Could you come take a look at this?"

"Hmm?"

"Well, this is locked."

When I showed the teacher the chest, he seemed troubled. I asked Sakurako-san if the key was in one of the boxes we gave her, but she responded by going into the reference room without looking for it.

"Hmm. Should we just give it to the family as-is?" The teacher stuttered.

"I wonder what's inside. Do you think it's full of bones?" If there were bones inside, his family would probably be confused. After all, it would have to be the bones of a very large animal.

"On the other hand, we can't just break it."

While we were talking, Sakurako-san sat down in front of the chest, and suddenly opened it.

"Sakurako-san?!"

"What?"

"What…"

She shrugged her shoulders at us.

"My grandfather often lost his keys. The key to this uses a very simple mechanism. Anyone who knows the trick could open it easily." She said, holding an office pin in one hand.

"Then…"

Was it really okay to open that without permission? I exchanged glances with Isozaki-sensei. Sakurako-san ignored us, and looked inside without hesitation.

"…" Sakurako-san exhaled with admiration. She took out of a few small bones and lined them up on the table.

"What are they?"

I thought that they must have been an amazing specimen, since they were locked up like that.

"T-this…" The teacher joined her in looking in, then spoke in a horrified tone.

“H-h-h-human…?!” He fell over, trembling.

“That’s right. This jaw isn’t from a monkey. We may have similar DNA to chimpanzees and gorillas, but this part is distinctly human.” Sakurako-san didn’t show any surprise. In face, she lovingly picked up the skull and stroked it. It was white, dry bone. White powder fluttered in the air.

“Ah… N-no…” My knees felt weak. “That can’t be…” I really couldn’t believe it.

“A human… is that really… what this is…” Isozaki-sensei groaned.

With Sasaki-sensei’s passion for bones, and the huge number of skeletons in that room, I immediately understood. I felt like Isozaki-sensei was overreacting a bit, since I already had a feeling. Thanks to Sakurako-san, even though it feels strange, I feel like I have some kind of affinity for it. To go so far as to have a human skeleton is pretty eccentric, though. The bones Sakurako-san laid on the table seem to be from a toe. Watching her reconstruct below the ankle made me feel dizzy.

“Don’t say that. Even with that right in front of me, I don’t feel the desire to turn it into a specimen.”

She wasn’t in any position to say that while holding a skull, using that tone, and looking back at us who are surprised.

“That…” It’s the corpse of a human being, not just “that”. Even Sakurako-san must know that. A human being isn’t a cat. Even if they’re both lives, it still isn’t the same. I still think it’s a sin to kill your pet cat and make it a specimen. It’s different, though. Killing a person and turning them into a specimen feels like a completely different sin.

How did he get the remains in the first place? Even if he didn’t murder them, and got somebody who was already dead, it would cause a disturbance if they suddenly went missing. Even if it was done skillfully, it still smells like a crime. If the person consented to it, does that mean it’s someone he knew them? I don’t think I would offer my corpse to a stranger. In that case, he would have had to turn the corpse of someone he knew into bones.

“Everything about this is too weird,” I pushed out of my throat. “Cutting up a human like that is just too crazy and weird.”

Sakurako-san frowned at my words.

“Boy. Are you saying you’re against forensic pathologists doing the same thing?”

“Huh?”

“In order to listen to the corpse, forensic pathologists has to cut it up. For the sake of knowing the truth and seeking justice. Humans have a drive to get that knowledge. Are you saying that’s weird, too? How big is the difference between that and Sasaki-sensei making a human specimen?” Sakurako-san said calmly.

There was a small but sure anger in her voice. She probably felt like I insulted her uncle, the person she respects the most. Despite what she said, I’m still not convinced that making human specimens is okay. I hung my head down.

“Besides, I… don’t think Sasaki-sensei made these bones.”

“…Why is that?”

“Look here I’m guessing that this area is a heat hematoma. Although it could be a cerebral hemorrhage or something, during cremation, direct contact with the heat source can cause burning.”

“Cremation…?”

Even though she told me to look, I didn’t want to see it. Besides, after hearing the word cremation, I don’t want an answer.

“Yes, but the remains aren’t usually so beautiful! With your grandma, the bones would have been ground up so small that they were like ash.”

It had only been 3 years since my grandmother passed. I still remembered her fighting her illness, and her funeral clearly. I will probably never forget that feeling of losing part of my soul when the doctor pronounced her dead. That sense of loss after the cremation when I brought home her tiny bones.

“Yeah, that’s how it’s been in recent years. The brittle bones of elderly, bedridden women in particular can’t hold their shape against the heating power in a crematorium. It generally can’t be helped, since the temperature can’t be changed to not destroy the bones. I think it would be a bit better if they returned them with only the flesh burnt off.”

Well, it is painful that her remains weren’t return in a proper form. I understood they couldn’t adjust it. Still, for the bereaved family, not even having the remains in their proper form is too sad.

“But, it seems that the owner of these bones wasn’t elderly, but it was a woman. Just above the coccyx, If you look at the angle of the pubic bone, you’ll know that- you, explain it to your precious student.”

Isozaki-sensei’s face turned pale after being suddenly mentioned. He was holding his chest, and looked a little unwell. He lowered his mask, and tried to control his breathing. I don’t know whether Is was because he was in front of Sakurako-san, or because he had his pride as a biology teacher. He decided to endure the nausea that was welling up inside him from the disgust of seeing a human skeleton, and forced the corners of his mouth up.

“Ah… Well, umm, while men have a pubic bone angle of about 70 degrees, women have an angle of 90 degrees.”

Sakurako-san snapped her fingers to indicate that he was correct. Isozaki-sensei nodded slightly and laughed stiffly. He stood up to calm down a little, and brushed the dust off his pants, and fixed his bangs.

“Based on the pelvis, it was a woman. She seems to have been pregnant at some point. That leaves the age… That’s right, there are faint parallel lines on the pelvis. She was probably between the ages of 25 and 30.”

Sakurako-san was holding the skull in her left hand, and checking the pelvis with her right hand. She can tell that much, even when it’s in pieces like this? The bones in the box didn’t seem to be in any kind of order. Sakurako-san looked as happy as a child digging through a toy box. She grinned with delight as she picked up various bones.

“Do you know what this black part is?”

“Of course I don’t know.” I’m embarrassed.

“Bones as beautiful as this don’t come from a regular fire. These bones probably weren't collected as a regular specimen, they were probably burned for a long time with a decent amount of heat. Besides that, I think the owner of these bones likely died of cancer. It was in the end stages. The black spot is where the cancer metastasized to. With the way these bones look, I don’t think they were cremated with the technology we have today. They were probably

cremated several decades ago."

I thought she was just playing with the bones, so I was a bit relieved to hear that she was actually investigating them.

"Then… In other words, this body was cremated, but instead of burying it in a grave… Someone put the bones in a box and kept them here?"

"Probably." Sakurako-san nodded.

"Then it wasn't from a crime?" The teacher sighed with relief. I was relieved, too. I still thought it was unusual for them to be kept here.

"Boy, your phone."

I was so surprised by the bones at first that I couldn't move. Sakurako-san sighs and tries to grab my phone from me.

"I'm reporting it. I can't leave these bones here like this."

"Ah, you're so troublesome…"

After hearing that, the teacher looked like he was on the verge of tears, and disappeared into the staff room saying that he'd report it. I was worried he'd try to escape, and sure enough, he came back after being scolded by the vice principal.

Part 4

The school was usually quiet on Saturdays, but it was suddenly in an uproar. The teachers who were doing work came over, and the police showed up. Soon enough, the tiny reference room was filled with a noisy crowd. Everyone was asking us questions about the situation, so Sakurako-san quickly explained that the bones were old.

The documents and bones were taken away by the police, but not much came of it. The reports on it were taken lightly, and it felt more like a surprising story than an actual case. A few variety shows even covered it. They didn't publish any details, upon the request of the family. Even though we discovered them, we didn't talk much about it. Two weeks later, they were able to tell us who the bones belonged to.

"A female… caretaker?"

"Seems like it. Natsuko Sone-san was Sasaki-san's older sister's caretaker."

That's what Isozaki-sensei was told by the police. He called me into the staff room after school to tell me.

"Natsuko…san."

Was that the woman who wrote the tanka? I remembered the poem written on that photograph. A corpse and disembowelment. What kind of relationship did she have with Sasaki-sensei…?

"Anything more than that is considered to be personal information for the bereaved family, so the police couldn't tell me anything else. Well, it's not like this is an actual case, so we shouldn't poke our noses in it. I feel bad about it, but I think we should just forget about this."

"But even if there isn't a case surrounding it, we still found it in the school reference room. They could have told us at least a bit more…"

Especially since there weren't any signs of trauma, and she died of illness, according to

one of the variety shows that mentioned it. If there isn't a crime, we don't have anything to do with it anymore. It's just Sasaki-sensei's personal circumstances.

Well, I that had to be the end of it… There wasn't anything I could do. There was no way for me to find out why Sasaki-sensei hid her bones there. Isozaki-sensei seemed unsure at first, and played with his bangs for a minute. Eventually, he said, "well, I guess I can't help it,"and stood up.

"Now! It's time to resume cleaning out the reference room. The specimens finally came back from the police." After he stood up, he grabbed my shoulder and pushed me to the door of the staff room.

"Sure. It might help take my mind off things." I can't help it, so I let him push me down the hallway.

"Oh, but it sounds like Sakurako-san will be busy for a while." Isozaki-sensei mutters to himself.

"Recently she's been working on a pretty difficult specimen, so I haven't been able to contact her much."

Sakurako-san and I aren't really 'friends', so I don't always visit her house. My messages with her are usually one sided. Sometimes I visit once a week, and sometimes I go 2 or 3 weeks without visiting. Occasionally I'll even visit every other day, it's always different. Since I always follow her pace, it's not uncommon for her to be too busy to call. Still, it had already been 2 weeks. Usually she doesn't go this long without contacting me at all.

"Well, she already did most of the list. It shouldn't be too hard with that."

Fortunately, Sakurako-san did her job well. All the skeletons we found before finding the woman's bones are listed with a number, species, gender, value, and condition, among other things. Things like "missing ribs" or "I recommend encasing it in resin" were written next to them. Based on that, Isozaki-sensei can decide on how to store them, and whether to add new parts to them once the police returned them. Afterwards, we had to check the bones, add the rest of them to the list, and figure out where to store them. It wasn't easy, but once it was done, Isozaki-sensei said he'd take us to all you can eat yakiniku, along with the cake he had already given to Sakurako-san. I'm weak to food.

That week, I spent every day after school working with the teacher. There was still no contact from Sakurako-san. I noticed "that" three days after the police returned the skeletons, while I was checking the list.

"Hmm…?"

"What's wrong?"

"No… Did the police not return them?"

"What do you mean?"

I arranged the specimens in their numerical order, but I noticed that some of the bones were missing.

"That's weird. The cat bones are missing."

"Cat bones?"

"Yes, I'm positive that there was a cat skeleton."

The teacher tilted his head to the side, then took the list out of my hand. I looked over the specimens one by one again. The cat bones that I saw before really weren't there.

“It’s weird that it isn’t here. Should I ask the police?” The teacher scratched his temple while he looked back and forth between me and the list. “Well, it’s only this one, and I don’t feel particularly strongly about the cat specimen. Besides, there’s no cat on this list.”

“Huh?” I took the list back. “What…? Oh… No, it should be…”

I looked through each line, tracing them with my fingertip. A dog, a weasel, a sheep, a snake… But there definitely wasn’t a cat on the list.

“That isn’t right. I definitely saw it, and Sakurako-san-“ Then, my thoughts stopped. “Sakurako-san…?”

In my heart… I felt a chill. “It couldn’t be…”

Sakurako-san kept praising Sasaki-sensei’s work. She seemed happy to see so many different species, especially ones she didn’t have already. An unpleasant thought entered my head.

“Do the numbers match up? How many specimens did we find before?”

“How many? No… I didn’t count.”

“Yeah… I thought so.”

Sakurako-san was the only one of us who knew how many there were and what species there were. Even if the actual number of specimens didn’t match, she would be the only one who would know.

“I couldn’t be.”

Sakurako-san’s morals are pretty unique, but she wouldn’t commit a crime like stealing something. What if it was because of her love of bones? She tries to collect human bones without reporting them. She could have taken the bones she wanted off the list and slipped them into her bag. Especially since she was all alone in the science room. There would have been a long opportunity for her to steal them. She even brought a lot of bags that day. With all the chaos, I wouldn’t have noticed if her bag was bigger.

“What’s wrong?”

“Huh? Oh… It’s nothing. I probably just misremembered.”

The teacher seemed suspicious, but I tried my best to smile and go back to work. It was hard for me to concentrate, so I made a lot of mistakes. Someone I’m close to committed a crime. I didn’t understand my feelings at the time, but my heart felt heavy. Doing and saying the right thing is what makes someone a strong person. I couldn’t do that. I didn’t have the courage to tell Isozaki-sensei that Sakurako-san might have stolen something. I knew it was bad. I knowingly stayed quiet about a crime. I tried to make myself believe that there weren’t any cat bones in the first place.

Sakurako-san made the mistake of telling me about the cat bones, otherwise I wouldn’t have noticed. I honestly wouldn’t have known unless I asked her. Besides, if Sakurako-san really did steal the bones, she needed to apologize properly. No, even if it causes an uproar, she can’t just return it before the teacher notices, that would be cowardly. With that weighing on my mind, the teacher told me we couldn’t work the next day due to a staff meeting. Since I had time, I decided to bring the cake to Sakurako-san as promised. I could kill two birds with one stone. I had a reason to visit her. It would also give me a chance to ask her about what happened.

So the next day, or rather today, I went to visit Sakurako-san’s house. I didn’t call beforehand because I thought she might pretend she wasn’t home to avoid talking to me. If she

stole the bones, she might try to avoid talking to me face to face forever. However, in reality, I don't think she really wants to stay at home all the time. I don't want to see her either, personally. I don't want to ask about her crime. It's difficult and I'm scared. I don't want to believe that Sakurako-san committed a crime.

The truth is like bones. Bones are grotesque. I hate bones. Exposing secrets also leaves a bad taste in my mouth. Nobody is home, making me feel frustrated, but also relieved. I take the bus back to my house. It's just postponing the problem. My mind told me "it's better to settle it early rather than prolonging it" over and over as I pushed the button to stop the bus repeatedly. But I can't do it. I'm a weak person. I can't swallow this cake that's supposed to be delicious. I didn't finish my dinner for the first time in forever. My mom, who had just come back from Tokyo, thought I'd gotten sick.

Part 5

Regardless of my sadness, my troubles, or how dark the night is, morning always comes. I was awake all night worrying about Sakurako-san, but a hot shower and the blue sky helped lighten my heart a little bit.

After school, I helped clean up the reference room more. I want to finish working as soon as I can so I can visit Sakurako-san's place. My goal is the same, but my feelings about it have changed. I focus on working for about an hour.

"Huh? Was this not returned to the family?"

The specimen list was finished, so all the specimens except a few the teacher picked out were put back in the cabinets. I open the cabinet doors to put a specimen away, but I notice that there's still a cardboard box in it. The box is full of poetry books. I'm surprised it's still here, since the teacher said he gave it to the bereaved family.

"Well, they couldn't come get it."

"Really?"

"I offered to send it to them, but they asked me to dispose of it. It seems they're dealing with illness, so it's hard for them to come all the way over here." The teacher says with a flat expression.

I wonder if they really can't come, or if it's just too much trouble… I guess if they're sick they can't help it. It's cruel to just throw away things that were treasured by the deceased.

"…Is it okay if I take it to them?"

"Huh?"

"It might be something important. You shouldn't have to throw it away unless they say they don't need it." I say to Isozaki-sensei after thinking for a moment.

"In that case, go ahead."

He reorganized the box. He only left the books, letter, postcards, and pictures in it. All that, along with a pair of glasses. It's enough that I can carry it in a bag.

"To tell you the truth… I want to know a bit more about what Sasaki-sensei was like."

I want to know why he hid that woman's bones here. If I knew that, I feel like I would somehow understand Sakurako-san a little better. Maybe I could use this opportunity to invite

Sakurako-san to come with me… I could kill two birds with one stone.

"…I see. Well, just don't bother them too much. I mean, I just better not hear any complaints." He crosses his arms and groans, then pushes the box towards me saying, "well, you can take it."

I'm glad I got his permission. Unfortunately, when the teacher called the family, they declined the offer. I'm pretty disappointed. We kept working for a while longer, then got a phone call. It isn't from the family we'd called, but from Sasaki-sensei's older sister. The family declined earlier, but this call was asking us to visit. Tomorrow is Saturday, so I promised to come in and work early. I still have things I need to do. I head to Sakurako-san's house. She greets my grumpily.

"What do you want?"

"I brought cake, as promised."

I hand over the box of pumpkin mont blancs from the teacher. She looks tired, but she accepts them without hesitation. She seems busy. She tries to close the door, but I put my foot in the way.

"Umm… I have something to ask you about!"

"Something to ask me?"

"I'm going to take some things to Sasaki-sensei's sister."

"…That has nothing to do with me."

Right, it's never a good idea to bring her to meet people.

"It's too heavy for me to carry alone, and it's near Chikabumi, so it's pretty far." But Sasaki-sensei loved bones just like she does. It might be easier for Sakurako-san to talk to this person. "So please come with me."

I bow my head and ask again. She stares at the cake box, then says, "I refuse."

"This doesn't seem like you. Why aren't you interested?"

"What?"

"This is about Sasaki-sensei. Why did he leave the corpse of his acquaintance there? Do you really think it wasn't a crime? This isn't normal." I lift my head and look her in the eyes. She immediately looks away from me. "I'm anxious. I'm anxious about it, so please come with me tomorrow."

"I'm busy tomorrow, though. Tomorrow, gran is-"

"I don't mind. Since the young master invited you, you should go." Gran, who had been watering the garden, comes up behind me and says.

I can tell from Sakurako-san's face that she's thinking "darn it!" Gran glares at her. Gran gently takes the cake box out of Sakurako-san's hands and says "after dinner."

"…I got it, tomorrow, then."

I watch Sakurako-san and gran's disappear into the living room, and breathe a reluctant sigh. I feel like I've done something terrible. I have to return the articles of the deceased, and ask Sakurako-san about the cat bones.

The next day, Saturday, I meet with Sakurako-san as the usual fast food restaurant. As usual, Sakurako-san isn't on time. I wait on a bench in front of the store. I smile back at the store's clown mascot to keep my anger from bubbling over. Sakurako-san is nearly an hour late. She's wearing her usual messy jeans and white shirt. She opens the door without saying

anything. I tell her where we're going, she puts it in the navigator, and we sit without talking for a while. She's listening to Diavel as always, but instead of his normal passionate shouting, he's singing a slow ballad. The timing is bad.

"Sakurako-san… Are you avoiding me?" I'm in a bad mood since I was kept waiting, so I finally cave in and ask her. "Did I do something? Or does being with me make you feel uneasy?"

Sakurako-san doesn't reply right away. She stays silent for a while until stopping at a red light. She quietly says "it's not your fault. It really isn't. I'm just… a bit tired."

I don't think that's it. I won't pursue it any further. I can't bare this silence, though. I feel like this is going to sound kind of mean. Still, I've been preparing to ask all morning.

"That reminds me, we couldn't find the cat bones. Do you know anything about them, Sakurako-san?"

I hurry to ask her before the light turns green.

"A cat?"

"From the school."

"I wasn't aware of any cat bones." Sakurako-san speaks quickly.

"No, I'm sure that you showed me some cat bones. We had a whole conversation about it."

As the signal changes, the car starts to move again.

"That… must have been a misunderstanding. I must have mistaken a different animal's bones." Sakurako-san says, then pretends to check the navigator in silence. Her tone seems strangely awkward. I wonder if it's because she knows I suspect her.

"You don't seem to make mistakes like that, though."

"No, I always mess up. Just last night, I accidentally broke the ribs of a Japanese rat snake I was assembling."

"Hmm…"

She makes another excuse, then goes quiet again. If I go any further, it'll put her in a bad mood, so I decide to stop for now. We have plans for today. Our destination is a paid nursing home.

I imagined it would look like a hospital, but it actually looks more like an apartment building. The orange brick walls give it a bright, warm impression. When we go up to the reception desk, a smiling woman asks, "what can I help you with?" then leads us to the room.

"Haruma-san, you have visitors." She knocks on the door to a room at the end of the brightly coloured hallway.

"Come in." A muffled voice responds from the other side of the door.

"Sorry to intrude. Umm, I'm Tatewaki, the one you called…"

The receptionist opens the door for us, so I introduce myself while I enter. A woman in a wheelchair next to the bed bows towards us.

"Thank you…"

Haruma comes a little closer to us. The receptionist says, "take your time," before leaving. This person is Sasaki-sensei's sister. I somehow feel like I've seen her before.

"I'm Sayuki Haruma, Atsurou Sasaki's older sister. I'm sorry for staying seated. I don't have use of my legs." Haruma-san says, stroking her right leg through the lace shawl on her lap. "Because of it, someone always has to take care of me, so I can't take it from you. I'm sorry to

inconvenience you, but could you please unpack it for me…? Thank you for coming all the way here to deliver it."

"Don't worry about it. I'm just a student with free time to spare. I'm sorry for visiting so suddenly."

"No, no, I can't offer much in the way of hospitality, but you're welcome to visit." Haruma-san says, bowing again.

Her ashen hair sways. I don't know her exact age, but I'd guess she's in her 60s or 70s. She's wearing a light beige blouse with a flower pattern, and a long, moss green skirt. Her sandals have a different pattern, but they have the same flower motif. While I think about the woman's fashion, Sakurako-san suddenly starts speaking.

"You have strange feet."

"Pardon?"

"Your feet. A square toe shape is rare to see in Japan. Your index toe is the longest, but your big toe and middle toe are the same length, and so are your pinky toe and ring toe. It's called the Celtic type, it's very rare." Sakurako-san whistles while she points at Haruma-san's toes.

As she said, her toes are strange. They look almost square. They don't taper like mine do.

"Does the shape of someone's feet mean anything?" I ask. Sakurako-san nods.

"Yes. Japanese people usually tend to have the Egyptian type with a long big toe, or the rounder Greek type with a longer index toe. There aren't as many people with the square shaped Roman, German, or Celtic types. The Celtic type in particular is rare to see."

I see. I probably have the Greek type. My index toe is the longest.

"Almost all Japanese people used to have the Egyptian type, but the population of people with the Greek type started to rise."

"Wow…"

"You know a lot. My brother used to say the same thing."

"My uncle used to say he looked forward to seeing peoples' toes when they wear sandals in the summer." Sakurako-san's smile says she does, too.

Haruma-san seemed wary of us at first, but she seems like she's more comfortable knowing that Sakurako-san is similar to her brother. Since she's more comfortable with us now, she moves a bit closer. She was probably close with her brother. She seems like she's kind and gentle enough to put up with having such a strange brother.

"Well… This is it." I say, taking the items out of my bag one by one.

I wish I could've brought the cardboard box the way it was originally, but since I can't drive, it would be too big to carry.

"Oh! 'Mistletoe'!" Haruma-san says, as I put a book on the bedside table. "Oh, so my brother had it." Haruma-san squints as she picks up the book. "It used to be part of my book collection. Nacchan was our favourite, so we often read it together."

"Nacchan… um…?"

I don't know who that is. Should I ask? Is it the woman whose bones we found? I might have been a bit insensitive.

"The female skeleton."

Sometimes I wonder if Sakurako-san is the queen of being unable to read to mood.

"…Yes, that's right. Natsuko Sone. She's the woman who used to look after my belongings, and she was my only close friend."

For a moment, Haruma-san looks sad, and has a lonely smile on her face. Fortunately she didn't find our questioning unpleasant.

"Your close friend…" I repeat. Under my hand is a folded picture.

I want to give it to her, but that gave me a bad feeling. It's because of the poem on the back. I notice right away. One of the women in the picture is Haruma-san when she was younger. That reminds me.

"Umm…There's also this."

"Huh? Umm, this is…"

When I notice her enthusiastic gaze, I panic. I start taking more postcards and pictures out of the bag. After I put the glasses on the table, I stick the picture at the bottom of the bag. That's all the was in the bag. I don't know what Natsuko-san was like, but… somehow it feels like she had a grudge against Haruma-san.

"That's all."

Her stiff smile says she knows I'm lying. I wonder if she saw through it? Haruma-san frowns, and looks displeased at the items, as if something important is missing.

"Umm… there were some other things, like teaching materials and clothes. Should I have brought those, too? ….Oh, and some old photographs."

"No…"

I add the part about the picture quietly. Haruma-san shakes her head. She thinks for a moment, then smiles bitterly.

"Is that so, I… The thing I was hoping for wasn't there."

"Sorry, If it's not a problem… Could I ask what that is?"

"…Were there any bones?" Haruma-san mutters, looking down.

"Ah! There were lots of bones." I say with relief, after exchanging glances with Sakurako-san.

There were so many, I wonder which kind she meant. Maybe Sasaki-sensei turned her pet into a specimen?

"If you tell me, I can bring it. Which bones?"

Haruma-san looks at the list of specimens in the science room, and makes a strange face. She spends a long time looking for her next words.

"Um… some… child bones."

"….What?"

Finally, finding what she wants to say, Haruma-san opens her mouth.

"A baby… animal, right?"

"No. A human child, the bones of a baby."

"Ah…" I unintentionally make groan. "Umm… that's…" With a stiff face, I give Sakurako-san a sidelong glance to confirm, but she just shrugs her shoulders. "…Sorry, there weren't any."

We already found human bones, it wouldn't be a huge surprise to find more. Since she asked such a straightforward question, she must know something we don't. Honestly, I'm a bit

confused about all of this. Since Sakurako-san has as hard of a time reading the mood as ever, she straightforwardly asks, “whose bones?” Haruma-san seems like she’s having a hard time deciding if she should tell us or not. Probably because it isn’t something she’d normally talk about. She still seems worried about if she should keep it a secret or not, but then she takes a deep breath to prepare herself.

“…It was a long time ago. It’s a secret between Natsu and me, but… I’m getting old now, and I’m sure Natsuko won’t mind.” Haruma-san takes another deep breath. “About 17 years ago… Natsuko gave birth to a child out of wedlock.”

“That was… probably-“

“No, my younger brother wasn’t the father. I can guarantee that. My brother… he was in love Natsuko, but she didn’t feel the same way… No, I don’t know what she felt.”

Maybe the bones are in the science room then… Before I can say anything, Haruma-san shoots my idea down. Now I know what Sasaki-sensei thought of Natsuko-san. He wanted to keep the bones of the person he loved close. Just like how Sakurako-san keeps the skeleton of her pet cat in her living room. An uncomfortable feeling seeps through my chest.

“My family used to be merchants, but stopped when my brother turned 20. Natsuko was the child of a prostitute, and she didn’t know who her father was. Natsu wouldn’t lie to me. I know her father was another man.” Haruma-san starts to open up, telling her story in a detached tone of voice. “I noticed the child once her stomach started to grow. While we were worrying about what to do, one day, Natsuko suddenly started having labour pains. Since I can’t use my legs, and I live alone, fortunately nobody came. She gave birth in my room.”

“Your room…?!”

“It may seem dangerous, but I once tried to pick up at-home midwifery.”

Can she really say it wasn’t dangerous if she’s still an amateur? Well, I guess I do sometimes hear in the news that people delivered a baby at home by themselves. With news stories like that, the baby usually meets a sad end. I feel anxious.

“So, were both of them… were Natsuko-san and the baby both okay?” I ask, but Haruma-san shakes her head.

“The baby was very small, as it was born premature. Perhaps it had already died inside of her, before it was born. Anyhow, the baby died before it’s first cry. It wouldn’t have known it’s father. So… Maybe the stillbirth actually saved her.”

Certainly, she wasn’t in a situation where she wanted the baby, but how can she say something like that…? Regardless of the circumstances, saying that she was “saved” seems selfish and cruel.

“But still, even if she didn’t want the child, it’s a sad thing. Fortunately, Natsuko was safe, but quite upset. She cried while she buried the baby.”

It looks like she has some regrets about that day. She covers her face with both hands before she continues talking. Her eyes are red from tears.

“After the long night passed, my brother told the pale faced Natsuko that the baby was buried safely. Fortunately, my brother was a tight-lipped man. Nobody else found out.” Haruma-san covers her face. “Even after my brother refused to take over the family business and became a teacher, he never proposed to Natsuko. I’m sure there was a gap in the relationship between those two. After I got engaged, Natsuko left me.” Haruma-san starts to cry.

Sakurako-san and I stay silent for a little while, waiting for her to calm down. I think about leaving and going home, but I feel like that would be bad.

"….But my brother still never forgot Natsuko." Soon, Haruma-san continues talking. She wipes her eyes with a handkerchief while speaking. "Natsuko's grandmother was a prostitute in the Nakajima red light district, but her mother died early as an unlicensed prostitute. Since she didn't know her father, and had no relatives, we were the only ones who would take her remains."

"Red light district?"

"This may surprise you since you're young, but from the Meiji era to the Showa era, around the time the 7th division moved into Asahikawa, it was a town where many prostitutes lived."

"Asahikawa was?"

"Yes."

A red light district is where prostitutes work. I've heard of it mentioned in manga, and in movies, so I know what it is. I thought they were only in big cities with a long history, like Edo. I can't believe there used to be something like that in a city like Asahikawa. However, it's a relatively recent thing for people to have stores to buy and sell women like that, according to what my grandfather said before while he was drunk.

"I can't move very well, and my parents have both passed away, but my brother kept Natsuko's bones nearby. He probably wanted to keep Natsuko close to her baby."

Haruma-san suddenly notices that we've been standing the whole time, and offers us a chair. I don't plan on staying for too long, so I politely decline.

"…I don't have any children, I've lost my husband, and I'm living alone. Because of that, I often think back to the time with the baby. She was so weak and scared…" Haruma-san holds "mistletoe" to her chest, and looks out the window. "If I could, I would like bury it in the same grave as Natsuko… But it wasn't at the school, was it?" Haruma-san mutters sadly.

Sakurako-san coldly says, "no, it wasn't at the school."

"Sakurako-sa-"

I try to stop her from saying something cruel. She puts her palm in front of me to stop me from speaking.

"But there's a possibility that it's somewhere else."

"Really?!" Haruma-san leans forward. I can hear the dry rustling as she drops the book on the floor. Sakurako-san slowly picks it up.

"Mistletoe."

"Mistletoe…?"

"There's a monument in Shunkoudai with that word written on it." Sakurako-san says. She shows me the back cover, where it clearly says "Shunkoudai."

Part 6

We leave Haruma-san's room, and head straight to Shunkoudai. After passing the underpass and turning the corner towards Suehiro, I can see Shunkoudai Park. We accidentally

passed by the parking lot, but looking at the navigator, it seems like there's other places to park. Sakurako-san turns right before the athletic park, and keeps going straight. There's a forest on the right side, and a normal looking residential area on the left. I'm starting to wonder if the monument is really here.

"I don't think I've ever been here before."

Sakurako-san seems to know her way around here pretty well. Eventually, we head back to the parking lot, and get out of the car. She puts her backpack over her shoulder and starts walking into the forest. I notice a sign with a red arrow that says "mistletoe monument, skunk cabbage grows in the area."

"Skunk cabbage…"

"That's right. It grows here in early spring." Sakurako-san says quickly as she walks along the path.

Skunk cabbage usually only grows on the edge of clear water. The scent of the forest is so thick that it's hard to believe that this is an urban area. I'm surprised.

"Over here."

We walk down a hill in the path. Eventually, the path splits in two, but there's a sign that point to where the mistletoe monument is. Bamboo grass and birch trees grow along the hill. The rain last night made the path slippery, so Sakurako-san keeps get further ahead of me.

"Try not to slip… Oh." Just as I say that to her, I fall to my knees.

"Geez… Who's talking now?" She reaches her hand out to help me up. I smile at her. I wipe my hands on my knees so I don't get her dirty. She snickers at me.

"You don't need to laugh so much…"

I was embarrassed and annoyed, but after seeing Sakurako-san laughing, I start to find it funny, too. I end up laughing, until we're surprised by a small bird flying away. I feel like it's been a long time since I last saw Sakurako-san smiling innocently. I really like her smile.

"Anyway, I didn't know there was a stone monument here."

As we climb the hill, we come to a fork in the road. Following the sign, we turn right. From here, the road is beautifully paved. We walk side by side along the narrow path, lined with swaying white birch trees and bamboo grass.

"It's a Eurasian nuthatch. Now there's a black faced bunting. If we're lucky, we'll see a Dendrocopos major." Sakurako-san explains to me while I listen to the birds singing.

The Dendrocopos major seems to be a woodpecker. I didn't know they lived in the city. Before long we get to a dead end with a bench. Sakurako-san points to the area opposite the bench.

"It's over there."

There's a rest area in the shape of a circle. If you look past the benches, there's a single stone monument standing there.

"Ah…"

It's an old monument, with only the words "Roka Mistletoe" engraved on it. Being able to see the streets of Asahikawa through the trees provides some relief, at least.

"It's so quiet, it feels lonely…"

"It's better than it being noisy." Sakurako-san says, then puts her large backpack on a bench as if it's a table, and starts to walk around the monument. The area around the

monument is paved. She looks a bit troubled, until her eyes move to the white birch tree next to the monument. “Give me the shovel.”

“Why do you need it?”

Doing as I’m told, I pull her folding shovel out of her backpack.

“Now then.”

After assembling the shovel like she’s very familiar with it, she drives it into the roots of the tree. The tree is bifurcated at the base, each side has thin branches growing away from the other half.

“This tree… seems a little sad.”

Mistletoe is a tragic love story. It seems like that’s reflected in the tree next to it, somehow. Sakurako-san starts digging at the base of the tree.

“I’ll take over.”

“I think it’s buried pretty deep. If it wasn’t, an animal would dig it up.”

I don’t want to think about what’s buried here. I’m worried that it’ll be too hard for her to dig it, so I switch places with her. The head of the shovel is a bit small, so it’s hard to dig very deep.

“Dig carefully. If it was buried right in the ground, it might be hard to notice. The baby’s bones, that is.”

In that case, it might be better for Sakurako-san to dig past here. Keeping that in mind, I keep digging. Before I even dig for 5 minutes, my shovel hit something hard.

“Oh.”

“What happened?”

“This is…”

It doesn’t seem like bone. It seems harder, and made a metallic sound when I hit it. I put down the shovel and continue digging with my hands. Eventually, I find a small, metal box in the damp earth.

“This definitely… isn’t a bone.” I take it out of the hole and give it to Sakurako-san. “A music box…?”

It seems like a broken music box, about 20cm wide. The moving parts seem to be packed with dirt. Sakurako-san wipes it off with her shirt sleeve. I seems like she doesn’t mind getting it dirty. Her shirt pulls up so I can see her stomach. This music box seems to be made out of an accessory case. Sakurako-san slowly opens it. The bottom of the lid has a cracked mirror. There’s a red cloth spread out in the box. It seems like there’s two layers.

“Sakurako-san.”

“Oh.”

There’s a small clunk as she removes the tray.

“…” I hold my breath. “…Was it cremated?”

“No. The bones aren’t pulverized, and they seem to have been dug up, then buried again.” Sakurako-san calmly replies. There seems to be tiny bones stuffed inside the music box.

“…This is really…”

Sakurako-san ignores my surprise. She sits down on a nearby bench and starts gently looking at the bones. I look away. Somehow, instead of feeling sick, I just feel sad.

“Hm?”

“What is it?”

She stops moving and picks up a bone fragment. It’s a ring-shaped bone. I suddenly notice what it is. What bone is that? It’s a bit too small to be a skull.

“…This isn’t from a baby. It’s probably from that woman, Natsuko, that we found in the reference room. It’s a piece of a lumbar vertebra.”

“Lumbar vertebra? Why is it here?”

Sakurako-san looks at the bone strangely. Surely it isn’t just a fluke that this bone is here. Sakurako-san suddenly starts to laugh.

“Sakurako-san?”

“The chest, I get it.”

“Chest?”

“The mammillary process. The lumbar vertebrae stand out from the others because they’re large and have 5 projections on them. It’s said that the hole in the centre is big enough to fit a human index or ring finger. It’s Latin name means “small chest” in reference to this process.” She holds the bone in her hand and lovingly pets it.

“Then…”

“Maybe Sasaki-sensei put it in… It seems like something he would do.”

The baby’s bones, lumbar vertebra… It definitely seems like this was done by someone who’s familiar with bones. It didn’t seem lonely, it seemed kind.

“Then, in other words… After Natsuko-san died, the baby’s bones were dug up and put in this music box, then Sasaki-sensei reburied it here?

“That’s probably right.”

Sakurako-san puts the bones back and tries to close the lid, but she notices something and stops.

“This is…” She mutters.

“What?”

“No…” She mumbles. She gently picks up a small, white bone on the red felt in the box. It’s such a small bone that it seems like it’ll disappear in the felt.

“This toe… is the same length as the third one.”

“The third one?” I don’t know what she means. Still, I’m sure she has thought of something, since she’s staring at that bone so intently. “What’s… wrong with it?”

“No… For now, let’s just return to that woman’s place.”

Sakurako-san hands the backpack and dirty shovel to me, then holds the music box tightly as she walks back along the path. She stays silent the whole time we’re in the car. When Haruma-san sees the music box, her eyes open wide.

“Where did you find that?!” Haruma-san rushes over to us in her wheelchair.

“Is this what you were looking for?”

“Ah…” She seems like she’s at a loss for words. She holds her hands out to take the music box. She quickly looks inside, then closes the lid and hugs it to her chest.

“With this… with this I can finally put the grave together.”

“That’s right, the real mother will be put into the same grave.”

“Huh…?” Haruma-san’s voice is shaky with tears. Sakurako-san calmly nods. With those words, Haruma-san lets out a short sound. “W… What are you trying to say?”

“Am I wrong? Aren’t you going to be buried there, too?”

“The real mother… Wasn’t the baby Natsuko’s-“ I’m confused about what she’s implying.

“No, that isn’t true.” She clearly shakes her head. Haruma-san’s fingers are shaking. “There’s several reasons.” Sakurako-san says. She sits down in a chair with her legs crossed, and stares at Haruma-san. Haruma-san’s face turns pale, and she hangs her head to try to escape Sakurako-san’s gaze. “You told us that a woman named Natsuko gave birth to a child in your room, then went and buried it herself. Even if it wasn’t in Shunkoudai, digging a hole right after giving birth wouldn’t be an easy task. It could have even proved fatal.”

That could be true. Even though I’m a man, digging through the roots of a tree wasn’t easy. Doing something like that right after giving birth seems a little unnatural.

“But neither her mother nor her grandmother knew where to go when they had an unwanted baby due to prostitution, right? I could see from her pelvis that Natsuko had experienced pregnancy. In any case, there was no reason for her to give birth in your room. Yet, she gave birth there. In other words... there was another reason to be there.”

Haruma-san silently hangs her head in shame. She doesn’t nod, but she also doesn’t deny Sakurako-san’s words.

“First, I don’t think you killed your child. I didn’t see any signs of injury. The fetus was less than 32 weeks, so lung function wasn’t complete, so it couldn’t breathe on it’s own. There’s also the possibility that the fetus died while still inside the womb, before it was delivered. Whether or not a baby is born safely has nothing to do with how the mother feels. They’re born by their own will.”

Haruma-san starts shaking. She holds onto her knees tightly.

“So I’m not going to blame you. I just want to know something. I don’t want to be lied to. Was it you, not Natsuko, who gave birth to the baby?”

“…”

“The baby’s toes. You and the baby have the same Celtic shape. Foot shape is inherited by your parents, and Natsuko’s first toe was the longest, so she had the Egyptian foot shape.”

Haruma-san stays silent with her fists balled up so tightly that they turn white. In the heavy silence, the only sound is the noise from outside.

“The Celtic toe shape is very rare. Though, as it’s hereditary, I can’t deny that there could be a large local population with it. However, I don’t think it’s a coincidence. There was a high probability that the baby’s mother had the Celtic toe shape, meaning that the mother was most likely you.”

“…That’s right.” Eventually, Haruma-san let out a long, long sigh. “Both my father and my brother had the same toe shape.” She seems like she has given up. She lifts her head and speaks in a calm tone. “Natsuko and I had a really good relationship. She knew about the pregnancy, and since we were close in age, we could be ourselves around each other. We opened up to each other right away, and we had fun every single day.” Her wheelchair squeaks. Haruma-san moves to the window and closes it halfway so the wind doesn’t blow in too much. “Natsuko always helped me out. She taught me to love my body. Just by looking each other in the eyes, we could understand each other’s feelings, like we were connected. This music box was a present from us to the child. It’s precious to me.”

Haruma-san lovingly looks down at the music box. She puts it on the bedside table,

where it shines dully in the light. She slowly moves back next to the bed, and gently starts to wipe the dirt off the music box with a towel. The sound of the towel and the creaking of the table accompany her story about her past.

She fell in love with her father's acquaintance who sometimes visited her house. Natsuko-san helped her write a love letter. Thanks to her guidance, she was able to secretly realize her love. Eventually, much to Haruma-san's dismay, she learned that her lover had a family. After parting ways, she realized that she was pregnant.

"I was angry at her for supporting our relationship. While we were talking about what to do, I suddenly went into labour. Natsuko helped me with the delivery, cleaning up the blood, and disposing of the baby."

Sakurako-san makes her fingers into a triangle shape as she listens closely to Haruma-san's story. The child, according to Sakurako-san, was definitely Haruma-san's. That's why Natsuo-san was able to bury the child right away. In that case, what's the point of uncovering her past like this?

"Natsuko protected me. She even threw away her love for my brother. Yet, Natsuko passed away before me." Haruma-san's voice is shaky. "I realized that I was alone. Maybe I'm just suffering as the consequence of my own actions." Haruma-san sounds lonely. She looks down at Sasaki-sensei's music box and starts to cry.

I can't say anything. Ordinary comforting words would be meaningless, and do more harm than good. However, I can't find the special words that I need to say. Sakurako-san also doesn't say anything. In the end, we stay until evening comes and the room becomes dark, sitting in silence. The air inside the car on the way back is heavy. I feel completely depressed, helpless, and don't have the willpower to ask Sakurako-san about the cat bones.

"In the end… Why didn't Sasaki-sensei bury Natsuko-san's bones?"

"…Why do you think?" After a bit of silence, Sakurako-san turns my question back to me.

"I don't know. At first, I thought that they liked each other. But if she liked him that much, why did she give up…"

I feel like I still don't fully understand Sasaki-sensei. He liked bones, so he didn't leave them buried, and he liked Natsuko-san, so he didn't bury her, either.

"Your bad habit."

"What?"

Sakurako-san glances at me. "There isn't necessarily always one truth."

"What do you mean?"

"It was probably Sasaki-sensei that dug up the bones. I don't think he even noticed the baby's toe bones."

That may be so. Sakurako-san cleared away the dirt on something that even Sasaki-sensei didn't notice. He was even a biology teacher. But why didn't Sasaki-sensei and Natsuko-san want to be together?

"You don't get it? Once he noticed the bones, he put Natsuko's bones in with them. He mistook her to be the baby's mother. He knew that toe shape is rare. Are you wondering how he could see that the baby had the same toe shape as his sister, but still think someone else was the mother?"

"Yes… That's right."

“Ms. Haruma said that she inherited her toe shape from her father. So, Sasaki-sensei probably thought the mother’s father had that toe shape.”

“Huh? B-but Natsuko-san said she didn’t know who her father-“

That’s when I finally understood. That’s right, Natsuko-san didn’t know who her father was. It’s hard to prove whether that’s true or not. After all, Sasaki-sensei’s father might have been in a relationship with Natsuko-san’s mother.

“Oh… I see.”

“Ms. Haruma also said that Natsuko and her looked similar. That would be a reasonable assumption for how she came into the Sasaki family. I can’t guarantee that it’s true, though. But, that’s probably what the teacher thought. The baby’s bones held their original shape. If the body wasn’t cremated, and the bones were buried in the ground, they would eventually become part of the soil. He believed that Natsuko and the him were blood related.” Since she doesn’t have anything else to say, Sakurako-san turns up the volume on the car stereo.

“I see… Then that’s why…”

It’s a sad story. Even for someone who hid the bones of the person he loved in a room, digging up a baby’s bones is still abnormal. I’m sure Sakurako-san understands where he’s coming from. As I look at Sakurako-san, I feel like she could definitely understand him, even though I don’t think I ever could.

Part 7

The next day, I cancel my plans with my friend so that I can visit Kaimono park. I park my bike near the library in front of the station. The letters on the “do not feed the pigeons”sign are faded. After I got home last night, I started wondering what kind of book Mistletoe is. I don’t have the confidence to search for it online myself, so I decide to get someone else to help me search for it.

“Oh, you don’t have it?”

“I’m sorry, we might be able to order a copy of Roka Tokutomi’s Complete Works…”

When I ask about Mistletoe, the clerk tells me they don’t sell it anymore.

“Complete works… Did he write a lot of books?”

“It seems so. It looks like he wrote over 20 books. It seems like they’re not sold as individual volumes.”

“T-twenty…” Buying the whole collection would cost hundreds of thousands of yen. “I see, it’s fine. Please excuse me…”

As I expected, I couldn’t find it. I thank the clerk who was nice enough to search it on the computer for me as I leave the store. It seems like all the regular paperback editions are out of print. I consider visiting Haruma-san to borrow it. I’m a bit reluctant to do that. I give up and get back on my bike. I remember Isozaki-sensei saying that he saw a panel about Mistletoe during a field trip.

“That’s right, at the Hokuchin Memorial Museum.”

It’s a bit far, but not so far that I can’t walk there. The weather isn’t too hot or too cold. It’s a cloudy day with a nice temperature. The way there isn’t as bad as I expected, so I start to

think I might be able to run to get there faster. Luckily the museum isn't closed today. Moreover, it seems like there's an no admission fee. I really appreciate that.

As I enter the brick building, I notice that the atmosphere is completely different from an ordinary museum. The gift shop sells JSDF posters, camouflage bags, and blue impulse DVDs. The receptionist is putting on the khaki coloured jacket for her JSDF uniform. There's a big screen showing information about the JSDF, not about history. I guess it's normal for a memorial museum to focus on the Asahikawa garrison. I'm worried I won't be able to find any information about Mistletoe here. As soon as I look at the exhibits, my fears disappear.

The Hokuchin Memorial Museum was founded to summarize the history of Asahikawa as the 7th division moved in. The hardships of the people who first developed this harsh region, the lives of the migrants, the anguish and sorrow of those who died after being conscripted, and the evidence of their determination are all vividly displayed here. I notice that most of these items belonged to people who died. It's not a beautiful exhibit, but there's definitely signs that they were once used by someone. At the same time, weapons that are used for taking lives, such as guns and swords, also decorate the display. For a bit, I admire them, but when I think about all the blood they've spilled, I feel like walking away.

The most surprising display is the most recent one. I'm surprised that it's not something ancient, it has only been a century or so. The bike on display is a dull black colour, but not much different from current bikes.

The 7th division of the army was organized to defend and develop Hokkaido in the past. Since they migrated to Asahikawa in the 1900s, it has changed greatly. The change was so significant that the population changed from less than 4000 to over 40 000 in 10 years.

After I finish looking at the display about Asahikawa's history, I wander around between both floors. I can't find the display about Mistletoe. Was Isozaki-sensei mistaken? After leaving the kiosk, I think about going home, but then I notice there's a book corner.

"Well, I guess I'll head back to the entrance…" I start thinking that it's about time for me to head home as I turn the corner. There's a variety of books about Asahikawa in a display called "The 7th Division and Literature."

"Here it is, Mistletoe…"

As authors who wrote about the 7th division, the names Sei Itou, Yasushi Inoue, and Ougai Mori are in the display. There's also a large section about Roka slightly apart from them. Along with the display, other things like tea cups and folding fans are set out, along with lists of some of their works. Among them, there's a big section about Mistletoe.

Even though he wrote about Asahikawa, Roka was an author from Tokyo. The protagonist of Mistletoe lived in Asahikawa, and was part of the 7th division. It sounds like he wrote this book based on part of his life.

"Suicide by handgun…"

An unfortunate person named Zenpei seems to have had a hard time early on in life, and took his own life with a handgun. I remember seeing an old handgun on the second floor.

"Are you interested?"

"Huh?"

Someone suddenly speaks to me. I look next to my side and see an old man wearing a military uniform.

“Oh… Umm, I was just interested in this story. I even went to a bookstore, but it’s out of print.”

“I see. Even if you do manage to find it, you might have a hard time reading it. It’s not a very easy book.”

This person seems like he’s the director of the museum. He tells me to wait for a moment, then comes back with a book in his hand. It’s Mistletoe, a story about the life of a young man who became a hero.

“I’ll let you borrow this, it should be easy enough to understand.”

“Huh? Are you sure?!”

Even though I’m surprised, I still try to be as polite as possible while I thank him. After I mention that I was absent for the field trip, the director is kind enough to show me around the museum. He must think I’m the kind of student who’s eager to study. Apparently the gun on the second floor is newer, the gun from Zenpei’s death was older.

“Have you gone to Shunkoudai?”

The director stops walking on the opposite side of the gun, next to a collection of swords, and turns to look at me.

“Oh… Yes. It was beautiful, but it’s a lonely place.”

“That’s where Roka wrote a poem. ‘At Shunkoudai, as I stand in remembrance of a youth disemboweled, the autumn wind blows.’”

“Disemboweled…” I remember Natsuko-san’s poem using that word, too. The sound of it makes me shiver. When he notices me wrinkled eyebrows, he slowly shakes his head.

“No. Talk of disembowelment and Zenpei’s suicide may sound eerie, but it actually isn’t. Zenpei died at a temple in his hometown.” The light reflects off the sword and into my eyes, making me squint. “That right, disembowelment – that is to say, heartbreak. It means overwhelming sadness. The isolation, grief, and pain of heartbreak feels like your stomach is being ripped open.” (TL NOTE: the kanji for disembowelment and heartbreak are the same, just switched around.)

“Huh…?”

“Roka probably liked Zenpei a lot. When Zenpei died full of regrets, and Roka looked back on Zenpei’s life, he described his feelings as his stomach was being ripped open.”

“Heartbreak…”

“I think he was a very honest man. That regret was probably mortifying to Roka… Do you know why?”

“Oh, no.”

I stare in amazement while he tells me that story. After we finish talking, I leave the memorial museum and get on my bike. I start to get cold on my home, so I stop to get taiyaki.

This store has been around for a long time, but it used to be at the Asahikawa station. I remember when my grandma used to buy me one on cold days while I waited for the bus to come.

“Could I buy one?”

Everyone in Asahikawa loves the taiyaki here. It’s not an exaggeration to say that it’s is a soul food for Asahikawa citizens, especially the banana taiyaki here. Since it’s so popular, people often buy twenty or thirty of them at a time. My freezer also usually has some taiyaki

stored in it. But, you can't just go suddenly buy a lot, you have to phone in advance and order it.

"We have two taiyaki that are ready right now."

"Oh, those then, please." Fortunately, I managed to get two of them today.

"Here…"

Warm food warms my heart. As soon as I leave the store I immediately take out a freshly baked taiyaki. It's piping hot, and the thick bean paste flows out of the skin. Although the skin is crispy, it's not firm, so it doesn't hold the bean paste in properly. I don't want to burn my tongue, so I blow on my first piece a few times. For the second one… I think I want to enjoy it more, so I buy some tea at the convenience store, and settle down on a bench.

"…"

I'm careful not to get my hands dirty with the taiyaki, take Mistletoe out of the bottom of my bag, and open it. It really is a sad story. It starts with his father being falsely accused of a crime, but with the aid of the shogun, the protagonist is able to start studying. He falls in love with the daughter of the shogun, but due to various reasons, the engagement has to be called off. He entered a military academy, was assigned to the 7th division, and the war soon began. Fate was not kind to Zenpei. He still loved his fiancée even though they couldn't be together, and despite desperate efforts, Zenpei was injured and came down with tuberculosis, then committed suicide with a handgun in his hometown.

As I'm reading, I think about Natsuko-san. I take the missing photo out of my bag. The way Zenpei was supported by the shogun reminds me of Natsuko-san a bit. That must be why Natsuko-san liked this book. That must be why the book Mistletoe had special meaning for them.

"Disembowelment…"

I remember Roka's poem. I feel like Natsuko-san's poem conveyed a grudge. Since her poem was similar to Roka's, maybe it's supposed to be about heartbreak, too. Mistletoe, piling thoughts, my corpse, disembowelment, the blooming mizuboshou.

In Mistletoe, the protagonist's life went out of his control, but despite his sadness, the flowers still boomed. I guess that's what it meant. The flowers will still bloom, even if you're sad. 'I've already died, and even if you find that sad or frustrating, you don't have to worry anymore.' Maybe that's what Natsuko-san wanted to say to Haruma-san.

"…I have to return this."

It's already going to be October this week. The days are short. It'll be dark out soon. I get on my bike again. I can't keep this. Haruma-san seems surprised that I'm suddenly visiting, but she doesn't turn me away. I apologize to her for not being able to give her the picture back yesterday. When Haruma-san sees the poem on the picture, she starts to tear up. These tears seem a bit gentler than her tears from yesterday.

Part 8

On Monday, I go back to the reference room. The teacher said he'd be a bit late. Since I'm alone for a bit, I decide to look for the cat bones before I start cleaning up.

"As I thought… it's not here."

I still can't find them. Why did Sakurako-san steal the skeleton from the school? It's not particularly special, and she already has a cat skeleton.

"Oh, oops."

I lean against the wall, and hear an unpleasant sound from my back. It's the skeleton poster. It's the same poster I ripped before. This time, the tear is bigger. I tore the arm part. I quickly put some tape on it. Since I did it quickly, the ulna and radius bones are shifted slightly.

"It's only a little bit, so it'll be fine…"

I consider pulling the tape off and redoing it, but it would probably make the tear bigger, so I give up. The rip is right above the "U" in "Ulna", but since there's no other problems, I leave it be. I'll apologize to Isozaki-sensei later.

"Ulna?"

I confirm it on the poster as I put it up. While I continue to worry about ripping the poster, I remember something. Sakurako-san's pet cat was named Ulna. Why did she pick "Ulna" as the name? Why not femur, or something?

"It couldn't be…"

That one thought sets me off, and various things start to link together. Suddenly, my phone rings. I'm so surprised that I fumble it a bit while taking it out of my pocket. I expected it to be from Sakurako-san, but I was wrong. It's Ariwara-san. How convenient. An hour later, I leave school because I urgently need to head to Nagayama. I'm going to visit Sakurako-san, of course. I should have called ahead, but that doesn't matter if Sakurako-san is home today. If she isn't, I'll just wait.

The Kujou house's gate is open today. Gran is sweeping with a broom in front of the house.

"Oh, young master, the lady is in the living room."

I nod once to gran, who is smiling invitingly, and walk up to the Kujou residence. It doesn't seem like she's going to guide me inside today. I've been noticing that I'm being treated less and less like a guest.

Sakurako-san is sitting on the veranda, reading a book. She really is a high class lady. The book on her knee isn't classic literature, it's a picture book about the human skeleton. Before she notices me, she gently pets Hector's stomach with her toes while he sleeps by her feet. Sakurako-san looks up once Hector runs towards me. She looks very surprised, and drops her book on the floor.

"I have something I want to ask you about today."

"Isn't this a bit sudden? I have plans soon."

"Then I'll come back after you finish."

Gran comes back inside while I pick up the book. She says "I'll get you a cup of tea" and faces toward the kitchen, but I tell her I don't need one since I'll be leaving soon. She asks, "are you hungry, then?" but Sakurako-san puts up her hand to signal to her to stop asking. Gran looks disappointed as she goes back to continue sweeping.

"So, what's the problem?"

Hector circles around Sakurako-san and I, begging to be pet. Eventually, he runs off the grab his ball, so I make him sit before I play with him. I feel better after petting him. I flip through the book on Sakurako-san's lap until I find the page about the arm.

“I wanted to ask about why you chose the ulna.”

“Pardon?”

“The reason you named your cat Ulna. Why did you choose the ulna, instead of a different bone, like the humerus or femur? You always relate things to bones, so I’m sure you have a reason.”

“…” She wrinkles her eyebrows. I keep talking without paying attention to her.

“The cat bones disappeared from the reference room. I thought the police might have made a mistake. That day, someone could have taken the bones during all the chaos. Then, I noticed that the cat wasn’t on the list you made. I thought maybe you were mistaken, and they weren’t really cat bones, but I can’t see you making a mistake when it comes to something like that.”

“No, I make mistakes-“

“That’s right, but this time is probably different… I’ll go over it again. The fact that the bones that went missing weren’t on the list means that the person who made the list is the one who took them. In other words, that means you are the one who did it. Even then, I still didn’t want to believe that you’d steal something from the school like that. I thought there had to be some other reason you would steal it, but I didn’t know what it could be. Then, I noticed something on a poster of the human skeleton at school.” I say, pointing to the white arm bones in the book. She leans in to looks at it. “The ulna goes from the elbow to the wrist, and it’s one of two bones in that part of the arm. Right, one of two bones. In other words, there’s another bones next to the ulna – the radius. The lumbar vertebrae in the music box. The Latin names for bones… Didn’t you, like Sasaki-sensei, pick a name that had something to do with the meaning of those bones?”

Sakurako-san doesn’t say anything. I can’t see what expression she’s making. I can see her eyelashes slightly trembling.

“You had one cat named Ulna, so I thought you might have had another one named after the radius. So… You had another one. A cat named Radius, right? Am I wrong?”

“…Go on.”

“But there’s only one cat skeleton in this house. That’s why you stole the cat skeleton from the school. No matter how much you wanted that skeleton, you still didn’t need to steal it. The question is, why did it have to be the skeleton from the school? There could only be one possible answer. In other words, the bones you stole were Radius’ bones.”

Hector licks the back of my hand. It seems like he thinks I’m bullying Sakurako-san. He looks up at me with his dark eyes, like he’s saying, “fighting isn’t good.” I mumble the words, “it’s okay,” and pet the top of his head. But I’m not finished with my explanation.

“…And if the bones were Radius, then it begs the question of why the bones were there in the first place. There’s the possibility that you donated them. But the bones were in the reference room for a long time. So, I asked Ariwara-san about it, and Hori-san, the school janitor. Hori-san has been the janitor for 20 years. During the school festival, he asked what kind of relationship I had with you, which really surprised me. I thought he was surprised to see me walking around with a beautiful, older woman. But that wasn’t the case. He knew you. He remembered you, so he was surprised to see you with me.”

Sakurako-san lets out a long sigh of defeat.

"…Sakurako-san, you're my senpai. You used to go to the same high school as me."

She doesn't deny it. Instead of answering me, she closes the picture book.

"Meisei high school used to be an all-girls school 10 years ago. It only became a coed school after you graduated. It's no wonder you would go to an all-girls school. So, your science teacher was Sasaki-sensei. Am I wrong?"

She puts her hand in front of my face and bursts out laughing. "…That's right. You figured it out. Good work, boy."

"Thanks to someone, I picked up some deduction skills."

She nods her head and claps. "Really? You aren't very perceptive, but you have natural observation skills. You might even be a better detective than I am."

"Huh?"

She indicates with her hands that she wants me to continue explaining.

"Um…. So, you knew Sasaki-sensei. You were probably close, right? That's why you didn't touch the human bones we found too much. Wasn't it out of respect? You also call him "Sasaki-sensei" instead of ignoring his name like you usually do. When I noticed that, I thought it was unusual."

Sakurako-san slowly nods. There's a smile on the corners of her mouth. It's a gentle smile. "…I told you before that when I make a skeletal specimen, I do an autopsy first, right? I learned how to do that from him. How to find the corpses of animals in a forest. Of course, he also taught me about collecting the bones and assembling them. Neither of us liked to talk, so we didn't have any unnecessary conversations. There was no need to say anything extra in the first place. There were bones in front of us. I didn't know anything about his personal affairs. But… He was a good teacher." After she says that, she tells me to wait a moment while she goes to the second floor.

When she returns, she has a wooden box. I recognize that box.

"You have a sharp eye." She says, putting the box on the table. She slowly opens the lid, revealing small bones inside. They look like the cat bones that are in her living room.

"…Did you go to the culture festival because you wanted the bones?"

"No, I thought that I wanted to see them, but I didn't think about taking them."

"Then why?"

"It needed to be fixed. I didn't want anyone else to do it. I want to do it myself. I didn't mean to hide it, but once the police came, I'd already had enough."

"Then why didn't you put it on the list?"

"I didn't want it to be put on display in its current state. This is a very special specimen for me. If I couldn't make it perfect, I thought about disposing of it. This specimen is my pride and joy."

This specimen is my pride and joy. I think I understand, she put her heart and soul into making that specimen. She really just doesn't want to put it on display in its imperfect form. She puts her heart and soul into her specimens.

"Then, did you repair Radius?"

"…No." Sakurako-san lets out a sigh. "…It's because of you."

"Huh?"

"When you talked about remembering the time the cat was alive, I thought it was stupid.

For some reason, it got me thinking about their lives. Ulna and Ray were always so close with each other… Honestly, this is stupid."

I blink, surprised, but she just shrugs her shoulders.

"They're dead, just bones… I don't have any feelings toward it. But I want them to be together again. Maybe it was because of the human bones in the reference room, or the bones we found in Shunkoudai. Even Sasaki-sensei had special feelings for those bones."

"Sakurako-san…"

"In other words… I don't want to return it. I wanted it to be with Ulna, like in the past… so I lied to you. But these bones were mine in the first place. I'm keeping it, even if I shouldn't!" Now that she's finally opened up, Sakurako-san starts sulking.

"…In that case, you should have been honest."

"I didn't want to. If I did that, I'd be the same as all those foolish, emotional people. Those sentiments are stupid, truly worthless. Even dogs have more self restraint." She says, looking at Hector. Hector is sitting and waiting for us with his ball. A droplet of drool is falling from the black corner of his mouth. We watch Hector in silence until I start to speak.

"Why do you think those things are foolish?"

"You're being nasty on purpose."

"I'll stay with you, Sakurako-san."

"What?"

Hector puts his paw on Sakurako-san's knee, and licks her hands and chin. Her anger vanishes immediately, and she laughs happily. Dogs are amazing.

"…It's starting to rain." Sakurako-san says, looking out over the veranda after our laughter settles down. The rain starts falling in the dull garden, causing the hydrangeas to sway. "It was raining that day, too. I couldn't think of anywhere else to go with Radius and Ulna's dead bodies. It seems like both of them were poisoned. Gran didn't say anything, but we think a rather inconvenient person was the criminal. Gran didn't let me take them to a vet. They probably couldn't be saved even if I did take them, though. They stopped breathing as I ran to the school. Sasaki-sensei didn't listen to anything I said. He started doing an autopsy without asking any questions… That's the kind of person he was." Sakurako-san speaks in a quiet voice. As she revealed such important memories, I feel my chest tighten. "After that day, he continued to teach me. He taught me to make accurate specimens on my own. They turned into great specimen. He said I was his favourite student."

"Those specimens… must bring back a lot of memories."

"He was a person who didn't say anything unnecessary… But there was one time when he talked about his partner. It sounded like there used to be someone he wanted to spend the rest of his life with. Even though she died, they could be together again some day. He said that once he died, she'd be waiting on the other side for him. Thinking about it, those bones must have already been there at that point, together with him."

She gently pets the cat skeleton with her finger. I pet Hector while I think about Sasaki-sensei. I don't think Sakurako-san could like an ordinary person that much. Sasaki-sensei was a special person to her. I'm sure there's a whole world that only those two could understand. It's a world I could never step into. It's probably a place I'll never be able to reach in my whole life.

“For him, death was always perfectly tranquil. I’m sure he’s happy.” Sakurako-san sighs. It’s a miserable sigh… It makes me a bit irritated. I’m right here, you know.

“…You don’t have to return Radius like this.”

“What?” She seems like she was ready for me to tell her to bring it back to the school. She looks at me with wide eyes.

“That’s what Isozaki-sensei said. You have a lot of fox bones, right, Sakurako-san? Since the school’s fox died in a car accident, the ribs are broken, and it’s in poor condition. So, you just need to give them something in good condition in exchange. If you do, you can have the cat.”

“Boy…”

“Those are the only bones you took from the school, right? Honestly, if you had just said something, this wouldn’t have turned into something so troublesome.” I say. Sakurako-san smiles at me, so I smile back. It’s a really nice smile. Her smile alone makes all my suffering and hardships feel worthwhile.

“Well, we can’t leave it locked in a box forever, so let’s assemble it. I’ll help you.” I clear my throat to hide my embarrassment.

Sakurako-san calls out to gran, “the boy wants some tea.”

“It’s already brewed,” she answers, and brings us a tray with black tea and brownies. As expected of gran.

“…If you think about it, a lot of things seemed strange. Normally, it would be weird for you to want to go to a school festival. You also didn’t complain much about it when I reported finding the human skeleton.”

“That’s right. If they hadn’t been the teacher’s bones, I would have wanted to take them home with Radius.” Sakurako-san has an evil smile.

“Sakurako-san.”

“Hahaha…”

Even though I’m shocked at her lack of remorse, she probably won’t change any time soon, so maybe I should stop hoping. Oh well, it’s not like Sakurako-san’s love of bones is anything new.

“Watch carefully, boy.” Sakurako-san carefully arranges the bones on the table.

I watch. I wonder why I don’t have the same unpleasant feeling that I did when I saw it at school.

“Cats have short intestines, because they’re carnivores. Due to that, the spinal column needs to support the internal organs much more than in a herbivore...”

Sakurako-san begins her “lesson” surrounded by the sweet smell of tea and brownies. With this, I might even be able to assembled skeletal specimens like she does, some day. Would that make me another one of Sasaki-sensei’s disciples? While I’m thinking, Sakurako-san puts together Radius’ bones. Still, after all this, I don’t like bones.

Final part

“Ahh, that’s better.” Isozaki-sensei says happily in the science room.

“Really… There was so much stuff… It’s nice to have it all in order.” I reply, looking around the room.

All the shelves are free of dust, and the specimens are lined up neatly. In the reference room, new furniture was put in, and everything is organized now. With the list, it’s easy to find everything. It’s pretty impressive that we got everything cleaned up. I’m proud of all the work Isozaki-sensei and I did, but I’m also surprised by how helpful Sakurako-san was. Of course, they’re only specimens used for teaching, but it’s amazing that Sakurako-san was able to classify them so well.

“I spoke with the principal, and he’s thinking of reorganizing the science room to have a display area. Please ask Kujo-san to help if she doesn’t mind.”

“She’ll probably be happy to help.” I smile.

I’m sure she’ll help with something like that. The teacher nods happily. Despite how she did something terrible, it doesn’t seem like Isozaki-sensei is mad at Sakurako-san. I wonder if all biology teachers are a little strange. While I’m looking at the reference room, I suddenly remember something.

“What is it?”

“Well… I was just thinking that this shelf is pretty tall.”

“That’s right, a lot can fit on it.” The teacher follows my line of sight.

This cabinet used to be in the reference room. It’s so tall that you’d need a step ladder to reach the top.

“There’s just one thing I still don’t quite understand.”

“What?”

“I… I didn’t take those bones down myself. Someone else had to have taken it down… Who was it?”

His expression suddenly freezes.

“Isozaki-sensei… You didn’t take it down, did you?”

“N-no.”

“…The school’s seven mysteries.” I don’t get this at all.

“By the way, I saw Sasaki-sensei in a picture once, he was pretty tall… hahaha.” He lets out a dry laugh.

This isn’t a laughing matter at all, but I don’t have much choice.

“Hahaha…”

With everything finally organized, I look out the reference room window at the yellow ginkgo trees. As the sun sets on the school, everything becomes dyed in fall colours.

Epilogue

Even though it’s already October, the weather is still nice. The cold evenings of fall are welcome after the hot summer this year, and the changing colours are beautiful.

“Oh, welcome, young master.”

“Good afternoon.”

I visited my grandfather and Kyouko-nee-chan in Nagayama, and got some rice bran saury, so I brought some to share with Sakurako-san. As soon as I greet gran, who is cleaning up the leaves, Hector runs out of the garden like a bullet.

“Hahaha, you have good hearing, don’t you, Hector?”

As soon as I crouch down, he jumps on me with his muddy paws. He licks my face and wags his tail. I’ve always loved dogs, but getting to be near one this much is a new experience. It’s really nice to be loved unconditionally.

Gran says, “you’re going to get covered in mud,” but I don’t know if she means me or Hector. I ruffle up his fur. Big dogs like to play wrestle. I throw the ball for him to chase after, until Sakurako-san shows up.

“Oh, you’re here?” I thought she’d be working inside, but apparently she was in the garden.

“I was reading. Honestly, your voice is so loud that I couldn’t concentrate.” She says, pointing to the back of the garden. Looking closely, I can see a brown hammock hanging from the trees.

“Hahaha I’m sorry. I was playing with Hector, so I guess I didn’t notice my voice.”

“You’re like a child, young master.” Gran says, brushing the dirt off my shirt. “Well, that’s enough playing with the dog. Go wash your hands and I’ll make you a snack.”

I feel silly to be spoken to like I’m a child. I pout. Hector is like my dog too, now. I always wanted a dog, but my mother didn’t let me have pets. Hector gets even more energetic every time we play together. Until now, he was given up to different houses and called a cursed dog. Even if he was given proper care, he probably wasn’t loved like he is now. This gentle dog has a sad past buried under his fluffy, white coat. Hector is innocent, so he deserves all the love he gets.

“A snack sounds nice. I just had some errands nearby, so I thought I’d come take Hector for a walk. Well, as long as that’s fine with you.”

“I don’t mind…”

Hector springs up as soon as he hears the word “walk.” He lowers his upper body and frantically wags his tail, like he’s saying, “are we going?! Are we really going on a walk?!” His tail is wagging so fast that he looks like he could take off like a helicopter. I smile and grab his leash from the entrance. Sakurako-san suddenly grabs my arm.

“-Actually, no. You can’t.”

“Huh?”

“Don’t go on a walk.”

“What’s wrong? Did you already take him for a walk this evening?”

“No, I’m telling you that you don’t need to go for a walk.”

“Hm? Why?”

Sure, recently I’ve only been stopping by the Kujo residence for short visits with Hector. Since it would be difficult for gran, Sakurako-san is so busy with her work, and Hector is a dog that needs a lot of exercise, so I thought I was helping Sakurako-san out by walking him. I didn’t think she would say that. That one sentence from her really surprises me.

“Don’t come here anymore.”

“Huh?” The air freezes in an instant. “What… did you say?”

“I said it would be better if you didn’t come here again.”

“No way…”

I can’t process those words at first. I look into Sakurako-san’s eyes as she speaks clearly. She feels strangely far away, like I’ve fallen into a hallucination. I’m dumbfounded by how sudden it was. No, maybe the truth is that I did notice a bit. Now that I think about it, Sakurako-san hasn’t contacted me since the case with Sasaki-sensei was resolved. I’ve been visiting without calling first because I was just visiting Hector. Maybe she was already starting to reject me in her mind.

“W-why?! Did I do something?!”

“It’s not a problem with you.”

“Then why?!”

“I’m not going to explain. Just leave now, and don’t come again.”

“Why?! Have I been bothering you and gran all this time?!”

Sakurako-san doesn’t answer my questions. With her usual calmness, she tries to drive me out of the yard. Even though she looks surprised and makes eye contact with Sakurako-san, gran still doesn’t try to stop her. Hector follows after us, barking in confusion.

“Please, at least tell me the reason!” I accidentally raise my voice. Sakurako-san clicks her tongue. I know that I shouldn’t have yelled, but given the situation, I feel like it was necessary.

“...Because you’re getting too close with me.”

“Is that bad? Is it because I don’t like bones the way you do?”

“That’s completely unrelated. Rather, you’re quite dexterous. You’re a lot better than I was when I first started putting together specimens. Plus you always treat the bones with care. That’s not something you could do without some kind of affection for them. Most people find bones disgusting, so that’s not the problem.”

“Then what is it?!”

She doesn’t answer that question right away. A small bird chirps in the silent garden while we stare at each other. Finally, Sakurako-san starts to speak.

“...I hate it when living things die.”

“What?”

“I’m interested in how corpses change after death, and bones have a special place in my heart. But that’s only because a corpse is a ‘thing’. It’s just a ‘container’ with no soul. I don’t like it when living creatures die.”

“Sakurako-san…”

“It’s the same for bugs, animals, and humans. Seeing the moment their hearts stop, and the blood stops flowing… is terrifying. It’s fine once that creature has started to rot, and is no longer itself. But I hate the moment it stops breathing.” She turns her head to look at the fall coloured garden.

I remember how quiet this garden used to be. A quiet, green place that was full of greenery, but in this garden where the leaves have fallen, Sakurako-san, me, gran, and even Hector are here now. There’s no silence here anymore. This place is full of life now. I wonder if

Sakurako-san is thinking the same thing. She sighs and faces me again. A sweet scent drifts from her dark hair.

“People always die when they’re around me. Everyone I keep close to me. Honestly… It’s almost amazing. You told me before that you only ever find corpses when you’re with me. That’s definitely my fault, so-“ She looks at me. “So it would be better if you didn’t hang around me anymore.”

“Huh…?”

“If you do, you’ll probably end up dying some day.”

“That’s not true!”

“I never want to see you become just a corpse. That’s why you shouldn’t come here anymore. It’s for your own good.”

“...”

I don’t know what to say right now. I want to laugh it off like this is all a joke, but with her dark eyes staring straight at me, I don’t think I can. That’s when I realize it. That’s why she always acts rude, and says things to make other people hate her. Even though she’s actually a nice person, she intentionally pushes other people away. She isolates herself so she doesn’t hurt the people around her.

“Sakurako-san…”

“It’s fine. Just don’t come here again. Leave through the gate right now, and never come near me again.”

“-I refuse.” I respond before I even think about it.

“...What?”

“I said that I won’t do it.”

“Did you not hear what I just said?!”

“I heard you, but I still refuse!” That’s right, I won’t do it. I absolutely won’t. If not me, then who is going to look after you? If gran gets called by the police, she’s going to be in for a horrible shock.”

“But-“

I put my hand up to stop her from talking. “You don’t believe in those kinds of unscientific things, right? I know you think you’re causing things to die, but you hate these kinds of ‘supernatural’ stories, right?”

“...What?” She looks at me with surprise.

“You always say there’s no such thing as the occult. Are you starting to think otherwise? You have nothing to do with those who have died.”

She thinks about my words for a moment.

“To me, you’re just you. Am I wrong?” I ask.

She stares at me, mumbling, “I see…” then smiles. It’s a gentle smile. Her smile draws people towards her, it’s radiant like the sun. Still, somehow, her smile still seems sad.

“...But you must never forget this. If you continue to stay around me, you’ll end up dying. Think carefully about what would be best.” Sakurako-san says quietly, then she returns to her hammock.

I was worried for a moment, but I end up grabbing Hector's leash and taking him on his walk. As I crouch down to put the leash on him, I notice that Sakurako-san is staring at me from under the big cherry blossom tree. Since she's under the tree, I can't see her expression clearly.

"Let's go!" I say happily. My anxiety seems to disappear.

Hector happily jumps at my feet. That's right, Hector and gran are here, too. Sakurako-san only thinks everyone around her dies because she's overthinking it. I believe that curses and fate can be a bit scary, but if you give in to it, isn't that worse? Of course death is terrible, but I still want to stay here, right next to Sakurako-san, just like I always have.